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ABSTRACT

THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE WRITINGS OF
G. C. BERKOUWER AND E. G. WHITE: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

by

Michael Davey Pearson

Adviser: Miroslav M. Kiš

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE WRITINGS OF G. C. BERKOUWER AND E. G. WHITE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Name of researcher: Michael Davey Pearson

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Date completed: July 2014

While compatibilists claim that divine sovereignty either elects individuals to salvation or inevitably consigns them to damnation without the involvement of human response, non-compatibilism claims that divine love requires both human choice along with a behavioral response. This dissertation examines these respective dilemmas in the context of the sin against the Holy Spirit with the purpose of ascertaining how these views impact the sovereignty and character of God and the resulting ethical implications. Compatibilism is examined through the writings and theology of G. C. Berkouwer, while non-compatibilism is appraised through the writings and thought of Ellen G. White.

This dissertation embraces the idea that God imposes self-limitations on His sovereignty in respect of the integrity and sanctity of human free will. It also recognizes that neither compatibilism nor non-compatibilism is free of theological difficulties; yet arrives at a solution to both systems in Ellen G. White's understanding of perfection in the context of God's call for mankind's return to the image (character) of God. This occurs, as by beholding, man can become changed. By beholding, compatibilism's dilemma of non-human response and non-compatibilism's undercurrent problem of works-based religion are resolved: for the solution is discovered in the empowerment of Christ as we behold and become changed. Therefore, man's personal accountability for damnation is maintained without man being credited with salvation by works.

The first chapter provides an historical survey of the unpardonable sin as it is described in the synoptic texts (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28-30; and Luke 12:10). This includes an overview of Calvin and Arminius, the recognized founding fathers of compatibilism and non-compatibilism. The second chapter examines the most immediate antecedents to G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White as they address the sin against the Holy Spirit.

The third chapter looks at G. C. Berkouwer's theological presuppositions that inform his understanding of the unpardonable sin, his understanding of the doctrine of sin, and his explanation of the sin itself. In turn, chapter 4 surveys the writings of Ellen G. White by dealing with her corresponding theological presuppositions and perspectives regarding the sin against the Holy Spirit. Much of White's positions appear in narrative form.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation highlights and then contrasts the theological presuppositions and doctrines of the unpardonable sins of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White. In so doing it is demonstrated that both are consistent within their respective theologies. Yet both are confronted by a certain weakness. Berkouwer's weakness is found in God's total sovereignty and mankind's absence of response, while White's weakness is discovered present in that many who embrace her teachings find an opening for a works-oriented salvation.

The last chapter provides a final summary and conclusions and looks at the ethical implications of both systems of thought. The chapter also discusses the sovereignty dilemma of compatibilism and the works orientation of non-compatibilism. The chapter then provides a possible solution in White's theme of the restoration of the character of God, as by beholding individuals become changed. The dissertation then concludes by affirming that God voluntarily places Himself under limitations of sovereignty in His choice to win our free-will devotion through Calvary.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

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of the Requirements for the Degree
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
<i>CalvWb</i>	<i>Calvinistisch Weekblad, Delft/Amsterdam</i>
CAR	Center for Adventist Research
EGWE	Ellen G. White Estate
FC	Fathers of the Church
<i>GTT</i>	<i>Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift</i>
<i>GW</i>	<i>Gereformeerd Weekblad</i>
MR	Manuscript Release
MS	Manuscript
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
<i>Ref.</i>	<i>De Reformatie</i>
<i>RH</i>	<i>Review and Herald</i>
<i>SDABC</i>	<i>Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Signs of the Times</i>
<i>WK</i>	<i>Watergraafsmeersche Kerkbode</i>
<i>YI</i>	<i>Youth's Instructor</i>

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Scripture provides numerous meanings for sin. All focus on the individual's state of mind and actions which estrange humans from God. The "concept of sin is complex and the terminology large and varied."¹ Sin is understood from two perspectives. The first is that of sin as an act. Sin "is whatever act, attitude, or course of life betrays the divine intent for created being. Sin alienates from God, divides the sinner from the community, disorders the life of the sinner, and in that measure disorders creation itself."² The second perspective is that of sin as an essence. As such it is a condition of the heart and mind,³ a state of being,⁴ and a broken relationship.⁵ Commenting on Matt 7:18, Martin Luther conceptualized this essence of sin using the analogy of a tree. Bad fruit is the consequence of a bad tree, and good fruit is the consequence of a good tree.⁶

¹Daniel Doriani, "Sin," *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 736.

²James William McClendon, "Sin," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 442.

³George R. Knight, *The Pharisee's Guide to Perfect Holiness: A Study of Sin and Salvation* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 18, 20-21; Jiri Moskala, "Sin," *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2013), 1165-1167.

⁴Knight, *The Pharisee's Guide to Perfect Holiness: A Study of Sin and Salvation*, 36, 46.

⁵George R. Knight, *Sin and Salvation: God's Work for Us and in Us* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2008), 41.

⁶Martin Luther, "Treatise on the Freedom of a Christian," *Three Treatises*, trans. W. A. Lambert, rev. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 297.

Meanings for sin range from “missing the mark or goal” or the “breach of relationship,” to “ungodliness,” “perversion,” or “rebellion.”⁷ The Old and New Testaments have numerous words used for the concept of sin. The Old Testament terminology does not always correspond with the New Testament’s. Words used in the Old Testament for sin are *’asam* or *’asma*,⁸ *hete*, *hatta*, *hatta’a*,⁹ *’dwon*,¹⁰ and *saga*.¹¹ Terms used in the New Testament for sin include *hamartia*,¹² *paraptōma*,¹³ *adikia*,¹⁴ *parabasis*,¹⁵ *asebeia*,¹⁶ and *anomia*.¹⁷ There are also grievous sins, social sins, unknown sins, and sins of omission and commission. Whatever terms are used for sin, they hold a commonality: all these sins are pardonable (1 John 1:9) because of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

⁷J. E. Colwell, “Sin,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 641.

⁸Translated as “to be guilty, guiltiness, fault, offend, guilty, trespass, and sin” (Lev 4:3; Prov 14:9). James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), s.v. *’asam* and *’asma*.

⁹Translated as “fault, grievous, offence, to miss, offend, sinful, sin” (Gen 4:7; 20:9; 42:22; Exod 32:30; Lev 6:2). Ibid., s.v. *hete*, *hatta*, *hatta’a*.

¹⁰Translated as “perversity, evil, fault, iniquity, mischief, and sin” (1 Kgs 17:18). Ibid., s.v. *’dwon*.

¹¹Translated as “stray, mistake, transgress, be enraptured, deceive, err, be ravished, sin through ignorance, wander” (Lev 4:13). Ibid., s.v. *saga*.

¹²Translated as “sin, wrong doing; usually any act contrary to the will and law of God” (John 1:29; 8:34; John 16:8; Rom 3:20; and 6:23). Ibid., s.v. *hamartia*.

¹³Translated as “trespass, transgression, sin against, moral failure, stepping out of bounds of God’s law, offence, sins, fall, faults, fault” (Gal 6:1). Ibid., s.v. *paraptōma*.

¹⁴Translated as “wickedness, evil, wrongdoing, unrighteousness, iniquity, unjust, wrong” (1 Cor 13:6; 2 Tim 2:19). Ibid., s.v. *adikia*.

¹⁵Translated as “transgression, breaking, violation,” see: Rom 4:15; 5:14. Ibid., s.v. “*parabasis*.”

¹⁶Translated as “ungodliness, godlessness, impiety, ungodly,” see: Rom 1:18; 2 Tim 2:16; Titus 2:12. Ibid., s.v. “*asebeia*.”

¹⁷Translated as “wickedness, lawlessness, lawless deed, iniquity, iniquities, transgression of law, unrighteousness,” see: Matt 7:23; 13:41; 23:28. Ibid., s.v. “*anomia*.”

A troublesome concept pertaining to sin is the sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31-32, Mark 3:29, Luke 12:10), for it is unpardonable, as it either will not or cannot be forgiven, making salvation impossible. It thus challenges some individuals' perceptions regarding the biblical doctrine of salvation. For such individuals, Christ has died in vain. While this sin demonstrates God's complete respect for human freedom, it raises questions with some concerning the character of God. The subject of this dissertation is the unpardonable sin.

Background to the Unpardonable Sin

Synoptic Texts

Michael J. Wilkins views rejection of Jesus and His ministry, which had been validated by the Spirit, as defiance and deliberation. "By attributing the work and power of the Spirit to Satan, the Pharisees are displaying the highest dishonor to God." As long as they continued to reject divine evidence, forgiveness was unavailable.¹⁸ R. T. France agrees, claiming it to be a "deliberate rejection of [divine truth] once recognized."¹⁹

Matthew: Context and perspective

Matthew places Christ's statement between the Pharisees' claim that Christ cast out demons through Beelzebul's power (Matt 12:22-29) and Christ's condemnation of them for their accusation. Christ claimed that character and righteousness (or unrighteousness) are revealed by one's words, which in turn is followed by judgment

¹⁸Michael J. Wilkins, "Matthew," *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 448-449.

¹⁹Cf. Num 15:30-31 for unforgivable blasphemy in contrast with unwitting sin in vv. 27-29. R. T. France, "Matthew," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 210.

(Matt 12:33-37). George R. Knight recognizes this when he says such a truth “does not bode well for the Pharisees, whose mouths have . . . set forth the view that Jesus’ actions were inspired by the devil rather than God.” If this claim is true, Matt 12:22-37 implies the Pharisees eventually committed the unpardonable sin.²⁰

Specifically, Matthew’s text reads:

Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy *against* the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age* to come. (Matt 12:31-32)²¹

Rudolf Schnackenburg argues that the sin includes a stubborn refusal to receive God’s forgiveness, which he believes to be universally offered by Jesus Christ.²² Michael J. Wilkins sees this as “a heart sin of unchangeable rejection whereby the Jewish leaders rejected the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives.”²³

Leon Morris regards the unpardonable sin as not a particular utterance or form of words, but “the set of the life.” When, like the Pharisees, one takes a hostile position regarding what is good and with full understanding, “that person calls good evil and . . . makes evil his good, then that person has put himself in a state that prevents forgiveness. It is not that God refuses to forgive; it is that the person who sees good as evil and evil as good is quite unable to repent and thus to come humbly to God for forgiveness. And there

²⁰George R. Knight, *Matthew: The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1994), 140.

²¹Bible verses are from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

²²Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 116.

²³Wilkins, “Matthew,” *The NIV Application Commentary*, 449.

is no way to forgiveness other than by the path of repentance and faith.”²⁴

Citing the New English Bible, Gottfried Oosterwal links slander against the Holy Spirit and the unpardonable sin. For him, the sin is a persistent and informed attribution of the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. “It is this work toward establishing the kingdom of God that the Pharisees attributed to the devil, thus making God a synonym for Satan. While the relatives of Jesus were guilty of such an attribution, their accusations were in ignorance. “But the doctors of the law knew what they were doing when they accused Him.” Their accusations were made “in the full knowledge that their charge was false.” He elaborates on the sin of the Pharisees by stating that the “imperfect of the verb, namely ‘*elegon*,’ suggests that these Pharisees did not just slander once or twice: they continued to say that it was the work of the devil. They persisted in their false accusations. That is what ultimately makes the sin an eternal sin.”²⁵

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* sees a strengthening resistance to truth that “culminates in a final and irrevocable decision against it.” This decision is made in spite of sufficient knowledge that one is acting in opposition to the divine will. “The conscience is seared by continuing resistance to the impressions of the Holy Spirit, and one may hardly be aware that he has made the fateful decision. There may, indeed, be nothing more than continuing failure to reach a decision to act in harmony with God’s will.”²⁶

George R. Knight claims that while it is

²⁴Leon Morris, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” *Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 318-319.

²⁵Gottfried Oosterwal, “The Unpardonable Sin,” *Ministry*, April 1968, 10-12.

²⁶“Blasphemy” [Matt 12:31], *SDABC*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1980), 5:395-396.

technically true that people can speak against the Son and still be forgiven, they cannot do so and be forgiven if they are under the conviction of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is the Messiah. To do so would be to reject the prompting of the Holy Spirit in . . . heart and mind. The result is a hardened conscience (1 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:15) that can no longer respond to the Spirit's work of leading people to repent of and confess their sin (John 16:8). Such . . . are beyond the reach of God's Spirit, for they have tuned out the only channel through which God can reach them. . . . They are beyond hope.²⁷

Knight agrees with most commentators that concern for committing the sin against the Holy Spirit is an indication the sin has not been committed. He agrees with Frederick Bruner's position that "the spirit of the sin against the Spirit is an unworried adamancy. It is impenitence, the unwillingness to repent."²⁸ However, Judas, a prime example of one who committed the unpardonable sin, gave clear evidence of a troubled conscience (Matt 27:3-5). Both Bruner and Knight claim that the sin "is not careless acts, it is a hardened state."²⁹

In summary, the scholars cited above agree on a number of points: first, there is a conscious resistance to conviction; second, a progression occurs within the individual to a place where he or she becomes unreachable; and finally, denial of the Holy Spirit in conscience and practice takes place.

Mark: Context and perspective

Mark pictures the topic of the unpardonable sin rising during the selection of the twelve disciples, when the Pharisees said Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul (Mark 3:13-22). The narrative concludes with Christ's mother and brothers attempting to silence Him

²⁷Knight, *The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier: Matthew*, 139-140.

²⁸Frederick Bruner, *Matthew*, 2 vols. (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 1:462.

²⁹Knight, *Abundant Life Bible Amplifier: Matthew*, 140; Bruner, *Matthew*, 1:462.

(Mark 3:31-35).³⁰ Mark places the dialogue between Christ and the Pharisees and the interchanges between Christ and His family immediately prior to the parable of the sower and the seed. Mark records Jesus' words as follows: "Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation" (Mark 3:28-29).

Yeager interprets Mark to mean that there is only one sin that cannot be forgiven. One should also note in v. 29 that *eis* is in the accusative, indicating a time extent. This means that there "will be no forgiveness 'into the ages' which agrees with the adjective *aiōniou* which defines *hamartēmatos*."³¹ Therefore, there is a finality to the unpardonable sin.

Walter W. Wessel does not see the sin as an isolated act, but a settled condition, the "result of a long history of repeated and willful" sin. If one "cannot be forgiven it is not so much that God refuses to forgive as it is that the sinner refuses to allow him." The tragedy of hardening the heart is that it can result in the sin's commission.³² C. Leslie Mitton argues that to "call what is good evil (Isa 5:20) when you know well that it is good, because of prejudice and ill will hold you in bondage, that is the worst sin of all."³³

R. Alan Cole sees the sin being committed by the willfully blind, by those who persistently refuse and are opposed to the Holy Spirit's work, while engaging in self-

³⁰Lamar Williamson, Jr., "Mark," *Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1983), 84.

³¹Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 vols. (Bowling Green, KY: Pelican, 1977), 5:206-207.

³²Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 645.

³³C. Leslie Mitton, *The Gospel According to Mark* (London: Epworth, 1957), 28.

justification.³⁴ Knight claims that to say Christ operated under satanic power was intentionally used to explain away His miracles and invalidate His teaching, which included God's forgiveness.³⁵

In summary, in Mark, the sin against the Holy Spirit demonstrates deliberateness (either passive or active). Far from being the result of a single act that is contrary to a person's general rejection of disobedience, the sin results from a progression in sin. God is neither directly nor indirectly responsible.

Luke: Context and perspective

Luke places the discourse on the unpardonable sin in the context of the woes Jesus pronounced on the Pharisees (Luke 11:37-52; 12:1-9) and their plotting against Him (13:53-54). Right after the woes, Christ warns that His followers will be brought before councils (Luke 12:11-12) and addresses the sin of covetousness (Luke 12:13-34). Jesus then says, "And anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven" (Luke 12:10).

Yeager notes that in the first clause, Luke does not provide a verb with the subject. The text is left with a suspended subject. The word *eis* is with the accusative, but in the sense of hostility.³⁶ This is indicative of both a human condition and a human action.

³⁴R. Alan Cole, "Mark," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 142.

³⁵George R. Knight, *Exploring Mark* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2004), 90.

³⁶Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 6:450.

Walter L. Liefeld argues that “oral blasphemy involves . . . an incorrigibly evil heart.” He holds “there is no remedy for absolute and complete denial of the one holy God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”³⁷ Leon Morris adds that in this state, people “cannot . . . seek forgiveness: they lack a sense of sin; they reject God’s competence to declare what is right. It is this continuing attitude that is the ultimate sin. God’s power to forgive is not abated. But [the] sinner no longer has the capacity to repent and believe.”³⁸

In conclusion, it becomes apparent that while the context of the biblical text in Matthew, Mark, and Luke conveys the same concepts, there is somewhat of a variation in focus between the provided commentaries in the three synoptic passages. While not in disagreement with the theologians’ commentary on the first two synoptic texts, the commentary on Luke adds the perspectives of “hostility,” evilness of heart, and “lack a sense of sin” on the part of the perpetrators. The consensus is that the sin is not merely an action but also the consequence of a developed mind-set.

Major Interpretations

There have been significant contributors to the doctrine of the unpardonable sin throughout the history of the Christian Church. Among them were Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and James Arminius. We will now briefly survey their positions.

³⁷Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 960.

³⁸Leon Morris, “Luke,” *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 231.

Augustine

A brief historical overview reveals a random diversity of positions of ante-Nicene Church Fathers regarding the sin against the Holy Spirit.³⁹ The first major contribution to this subject was made by Augustine (354-430) who argues that the unpardonable sin is final impenitence (*impoenitentia finalis*).⁴⁰ He also claims that the sin against the Holy Spirit is to deny the Spirit's activity in the Church.⁴¹ The sin is also a failure to receive the sacraments,⁴² and failure to believe that sins are forgiven in the Church.⁴³ His understanding of the unpardonable sin provides foundations for his view of divine

³⁹The threat of the unpardonable sin was used to protect of the church from both internal and external attack: see: Novatian *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* 29 (ANF, 4:252); Cyprian *Letters* 16.2 (FC, 51:47-49); Athanasius *Against Arians* 1.12.50 (NPNF 2, 4:335-336); Basil *On the Spirit* 10.25 (NPNF 2, 8:17); Cyril *Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem Catecheses* 16.1 (FC 2, 64:76); Gregory Nazianzen *On the Holy Spirit* 30 (NPNF 2, 7:327); Gregory of Nyssa *On the Holy Spirit against Macedonius* (NPNF 2, 5:316-317); Ambrose *On the Holy Spirit* 1.3.54 (NPNF 2, 10:348); Niceta of Remesiana *The Power of the Holy Spirit* 17, 18 (FC, 7:37-38). With varying perspectives it was also seen as a rejection of truth: see, Hermas 10.2 (ANF, 2:26-27); Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200) *Against Heresies* 3.11.9 (ANF, 1:429); *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (c. 120) 18 (ANF, 7:457-458); Origen *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 2.6 (ANF, 9:329); Cyprian *Letters* 16.2 (FC, 51:47-48); Cyril *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem Catecheses* 16.1 (FC 2, 64:76); Augustine *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 21.11 (NPNF 1, 6:321-322); Leo the Great (400-461) *Sermons* 75.4 (NPNF 2, 12:191); Peter Lombard, see: William W. Combs, "The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1985), 23; Thomas Aquinas, see: *The 1974 Catholic Almanac*, ed. Felician A. Foy (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1974), 377; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955-1969), 28:244; Edward M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 3 vols. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 3:1321. Some understood it as a rejection of the divine nature. See: Basil *Letters* 159.2 (NPNF 2, 8:212); 251.4 (NPNF 2, 8:292); *On the Spirit* 10.25 (NPNF 2, 8:17). Others who support Basil's position are: Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395) *On the Holy Spirit against Macedonius* (NPNF 2, 5:316-317); (NPNF, 2, 5:321-324); Ambrose *On the Holy Spirit* 1.3.54 (NPNF, 2, 10:100); John Chrysostom *Gospel of Matthew* 41.4-5 (NPNF 1, 10:266-267); Augustine *On the Holy Trinity* 1.11.22 (NPNF 1, 3:30); 21:10 (NPNF 1, 6:321); *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 21.24 (NPNF 1, 6:326); 21.36 (NPNF 1, 6:331).

⁴⁰Augustine *On Rebuke and Grace* 35 (NPNF 1, 5:486); *Sermons on New Testament Lesson* 21.21 (NPNF 1, 6:325); *Concerning the Correction of the Donatists* 11.49 (NPNF 1, 4:651); Thomas Aquinas supports this position, see: *The 1974 Catholic Almanac*, 377.

⁴¹Augustine *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 21.5 (NPNF 1, 6:319).

⁴²Augustine *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 21.36 (NPNF 1, 6:331).

⁴³Augustine *Faith, Hope, and Charity* 22.83, Ancient Christian Writers, 56 vols., trans. Louis A. Arand (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1947), 3:82.

determinism.⁴⁴ Finally, impenitence is against God's grace.⁴⁵

Roman Catholic theology

Roman Catholic theology makes a contrast between venial sins and mortal sins. Venial sins are those sins which are deemed unhelpful to the health of the soul, but do not threaten the soul. Mortal sins are sins that are fatal to the soul if left unconfessed; and if left in this state hold the potential of becoming unpardonable. Catholicism holds that there is no limit to God's forgiveness unless there is a deliberate refusal to accept mercy through confession.⁴⁶

Martin Luther

In the theology of Martin Luther (1483-1546) God wills evil. While God wills all "should be bound by His laws, He does not will that all fulfill them." God hardens those whom He allows to voluntarily remain in sin.⁴⁷ This position indicates an acceptance on the part of Luther of a certain divine determinism. A cause of the unpardonable sin is to walk in pride.⁴⁸ Among his definitions of the unpardonable sin is a bitter grief and torment of conscience which results in total despair.⁴⁹ Acknowledged sin is forgivable, but defended sin is unforgivable; for to defend sin means agreement with sin, and

⁴⁴Augustine *City of God* (NPNF 1, 2:1-511).

⁴⁵Augustine *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 21.20 (NPNF 1, 6:325).

⁴⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994), 365.

⁴⁷Luther, *Luther's Works*, 25:162-163; 25:376.

⁴⁸Ibid., 10:275. When one slips into adultery, blasphemy, and slander, one is not fighting against God if one realizes that he has fallen away from God. It is in becoming disdainful and proud after the fall into sin that the individual now fights against God and so sins against the Holy Spirit. See: Ibid., 28:292.

⁴⁹Ibid., 6:131-132.

agreement with sin indicates approval. This ultimately results in the unpardonable sin.⁵⁰

In defending and excusing sin one is led to cultivate a lie for the sake of protecting personal piety.⁵¹ This results in the rejection of Christ and His Word.⁵²

John Calvin

For John Calvin (1509-1564) the sin against the Holy Spirit is understood within the context of divine determinism, compatibilism,⁵³ and monergism,⁵⁴ while James Arminius understands the unpardonable sin within the concept of freedom of the human will, non-compatibilism, and synergism.⁵⁵

John Calvin claims that though God invites all to accept salvation, He allows the Reprobate to be blind to truth while giving the Elect new eyes that incline their hearts to obedience. It is this free adoption alone that causes the calling of the elect and distinguishes them from the reprobate. The efficacy of being called consists in both the grace God offers and that the will of the elect is formed to embrace it.⁵⁶ God “directs exhortations to all in common. The efficacy of this depends upon the Spirit of regeneration.” In turn, the Holy Spirit is dependent on “whomsoever God wills to snatch

⁵⁰Ibid., 17:271-272.

⁵¹Ibid., 18:414; 34:101.

⁵²Ibid., 24:284-285.

⁵³Note the definitions of these terms in Chapter 1, pp. 5 and 6.

⁵⁴“Genuine freedom requires an individual to have more than one possibility that is actually possible at the time of choosing, not merely possibilities that would be open if certain facts that do not obtain were to obtain.” C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 26.

⁵⁵James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 2:531-532.

⁵⁶John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, 3 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 3:253-254.

from death.” Repentance is not the cause of salvation, but is inseparable from faith and mercy. Through election God demonstrates His Fatherly favor and He “hardens and he thunders against the reprobate, whose impiety is unforgivable.”⁵⁷

Though Calvin embraces divine election as the determinant factor in salvation, he posits that the sin against the Holy Spirit is the result of rebellion after the power of God has been revealed. Ignorance cannot be considered in mitigation. Moreover, those “who are destitute of the light of the Spirit cannot be held guilty of this crime.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, he adds that those “whom the Lord has once determined to snatch from this gulf of destruction he defers until his own time; he only preserves them from falling into unpardonable blasphemy.”⁵⁹

“They sin against the Holy Spirit who, with evil intention, resist God’s truth. . . . Such resistance alone constitutes this sin.” For Calvin, the sin against the Holy Spirit is committed by those who, convicted in their consciences, deliberately impugn and repudiate the Word of God, in that they strive against the illumination of the Spirit. This happens when one opposes doctrine once convicted that it is from God.⁶⁰

The sin is something that one “falls into.” It is neither “a partial fall,” nor “a transgression of a single commandment, but apostasy, by which men wholly alienate

⁵⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4 vols. (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2002), 3.3.21.

⁵⁸John Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 2, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 32:74.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 3.24.11.

⁶⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.22.

themselves from God.”⁶¹ It is an apostasy of the whole man and is a willful and deliberate act.⁶² There is a sequence of events that occurs once a person has completely fallen away from the gospel.⁶³ However, this must be understood in the context of God’s sovereign will. The sin is the result of being reprobate. Those regenerated (the elect) cannot fall into this sin.⁶⁴ The one who has been truly regenerated by the Holy Spirit cannot possibly fall into this sin.⁶⁵ The sacraments are “administered alike to reprobate and elect, but the reality reaches the latter only.”⁶⁶ Repentance is the will of God and not man (predetermination).⁶⁷ Finally, it is God who hardens the hearts of mankind.⁶⁸

James Arminius

Man was created as a rational creature, with both salvation and damnation offered on condition of obedience or disobedience to God.⁶⁹ Arminius’s view of the decrees of God is found in the context that at creation, man was endowed with “knowledge, holiness and power, as enabled him to understand, esteem, consider, will, and to perform THE TRUE GOOD, according to the commandment delivered to him. Yet none of these acts

⁶¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 269.

⁶²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.23.

⁶³Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 269.

⁶⁴Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 2, 32:76-77.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 32:76.

⁶⁶Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, 2:216.

⁶⁷Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 269; *idem*, *Institutes*, 3.3.21.

⁶⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.21.

⁶⁹Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 2:482.

could he do, *except through the assistance of Divine Grace.*” Moreover, when “he is made a partaker of this regeneration or renovation . . . since he is delivered from sin, he is capable of thinking, willing and doing that which is good, but yet *not without the continued aids of Divine Grace.*”⁷⁰

God’s providence presides over everything (including the beginning of sin). God gave permission for sin, its progress, and completion. God provides either punishment or remission for sin. However, he does not equate permission as authorship, for the liberty of sin is tied to the human will.⁷¹ While God’s providence permits and acts, it is neither a withdrawal of divine grace by which He executes His decrees, nor His doing.⁷² Arminius cites Melancthon and the Belgic Confession to support that faith is bestowed even on the non-elect.⁷³

Arminius believes that those regenerated by the Holy Spirit are capable of deliberate sin, which lays waste to the conscience. Thus they grieve the Holy Spirit, so that He is incapable of exerting any influence or power over them until they are brought back to repentance.⁷⁴

Arminius claims that the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28, 29; and Luke 12:10) connect the sin to the Holy Spirit, making Him its object.⁷⁵ Impenitence is in opposition to conversion, and when impenitence is final, it “condemns a man through the

⁷⁰Ibid., 1:252-253.

⁷¹Ibid., 2:468-469.

⁷²Ibid., 2:488-489.

⁷³Ibid., 1:279-282.

⁷⁴Ibid., 2:502.

⁷⁵Ibid., 2:514.

peremptory decree of God.” Yet final impenitence is not the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, for it is common to all who will finally be condemned. In addition, final impenitence is relevant to the end of life, while the sin against the Holy Spirit occurs in the duration of life (1 John 5:16).⁷⁶ The sin is a transgression of a universal precept commanding faith in Jesus Christ. It is a cognitive rejection and refusal of Christ.⁷⁷ It is infidelity and the unbelief of those who have heard and understood, those “convinced in their consciences that Jesus is the Christ.” By infidelity they continue to reject Him. Thus its genus is a “repulsion and rejection of Christ in opposition to conscience.”⁷⁸

Arminius identifies the will as “the proper, adequate and immediate cause of sin.” The will is moved through persuasion and enticement.⁷⁹

No one committing the sin escapes eternal death. It is unpardonable in that once perpetrated, the sinner can never obtain remission from God. This is God’s “perpetual and immutable decree” concerning the non-forgiveness of sins without repentance and the heinousness of the sin. Arminius writes that renewal through repentance proceeds from God’s mercy and grace in Christ, “on account of the intercession of Christ, through the operation of the Holy Spirit. . . . But this mercy of God, intercession of Christ, and operation of the Holy Spirit, are not infinite. . . . They do not operate according to the

⁷⁶Ibid., 2:517-518.

⁷⁷Arminius identifies four degrees to the sin. First, the rejection of Christ and the truth of the gospel, once He has been acknowledged. Second, blasphemy against Christ and the recognized truth of the gospel. Third, “the assaulting and persecution of Christ,” either in his own Person or in those of His members, “or the extirpation of the truth acknowledged.” And fourth is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit Himself. Ibid., 2:529.

⁷⁸Ibid., 2:519-520.

⁷⁹Ibid., 2:525-526.

infinite omnipotence of God and Christ, and of his Spirit; but they are circumscribed by a certain mode of the equity and will of God.”⁸⁰

The unpardonable sin is heinous because the perpetrators reject the very remedy for sin’s remission. For God to override this rejection would be to divest Himself of His “justice, and remove from his free will the administration of divine mercy. When we have done this, and have ascribed the dispensing of salvation to the infinity of the divine mercy or goodness only, the very foundations of religion are then overturned.”⁸¹

Contemporary scholarship

Apart from brief discussions on the sin against the Holy Spirit in most Bible commentaries, a number of scholars deal briefly with the topic. A brief bibliographical survey of scholars who have contributed to the conversation is provided in the footnote below.⁸²

Representatives of compatibilism and non-compatibilism

The dissertation examines the doctrine of the sin against the Holy Spirit in the

⁸⁰Ibid., 2:529-530.

⁸¹Ibid., 2:531-532.

⁸²See: Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941); J. O. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962); Yves Congar, “Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” *Experience of the Spirit*, trans. Paul Burns, ed. Peter Huizing and William Bassett (New York: Seabury, 1974/6), 47-57; George O. Wood, “The Unpardonable Sin,” in *Conference on the Holy Spirit*, 2 vols., ed. Gwen Jones (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1982), 1:100-108; Henry A. Virkler, “Allaying Fears about the Unpardonable Sin,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 3 (1999): 254-269; Baird Tipson, “A Dark Side of Seventeenth-Century English Protestantism: The Sin against the Holy Spirit,” *Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 3-4 (1984): 301-330; J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (New York: Revell, n.d.); H. C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949); J. R. Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988, 1990); Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 21-22; William W. Combs, “The Blasphemy against the Spirit,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 57-96.

context of contemporary theological divisions between compatibilism/monergism and non-compatibilism/synergism as they are understood within Calvinism and Arminianism. A representative from each of Calvinism and Arminianism is used as case studies.

Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer (1903-1996) is a Dutch Reformed theologian who “emphasized the reformation starting points of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*.”⁸³ Though committed to a “reflective and informed theology” within the Reformed tradition, “he never lost sight of theology’s need to focus on the practical concerns of the Christian life.”⁸⁴ Within this context he developed a theology on the sin against the Holy Spirit.

While Berkouwer well represents the Calvinist position regarding the sin against the Holy Spirit, Ellen Gould White (1827-1915) understood the unpardonable sin within the context of the Arminian tradition. White was born into a Methodist family and came under the influence of William Miller and the Second Advent preachers at age thirteen.⁸⁵ She published more than fifty-five books and thousands of letters and journal articles in her lifetime⁸⁶ and numerous journal articles. These include spiritual counsel and biblical narrative. White was not a systematic theologian. Neither was John Wesley; yet both White and Wesley wrote consistent and non-contradictory theology within the Arminian tradition. Like Berkouwer, she was concerned with the practical aspects of Christian life.

⁸³W. A. Elwell, “Berkouwer, Gerrit Cornelis,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 151.

⁸⁴Gary L. Watts, “G. C. Berkouwer,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Ellwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 193-194. See: G. C. Berkouwer, *Geloof en openbaring in die nuwere Duitse theologie* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1932), 66, 75.

⁸⁵Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1978), 11, 13.

⁸⁶George R. Knight, *Meeting Ellen White* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1996), 92.

Statement of the Problem

Both Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer (compatibilist) and Ellen Gould White (non-compatibilist) address the scriptural teaching regarding the sin against the Holy Spirit. Both approaches claim to be coherent with Scripture. However, do the contrasting assumptions regarding the notions of human free will render the two approaches to the sin against the Holy Spirit coherent internally and with Scripture? It would seem that the two approaches cannot both be coherent with Scripture. This is the problem addressed by this dissertation.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover, describe, and compare the contrasting positions of Berkouwer and White on the unpardonable sin, and in doing so identify the theological assumptions that form the basis for the two contrasting theologies (Calvinism and Arminianism) of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Second, it sought to discover some of the theological and ethical implications arising from their diverse perspectives.

The answers arrived at through this study should help determine two things. First, is whether their respective theologies are consistent with *praxis fide*. Second, is whether or not their respective positions are internally compatible with their respective theologies and with Scripture regarding divine determinism and the human will.

Justification

Existent study on the sin against the Holy Spirit appears to have paid scant attention to the relationship of the unpardonable sin to Calvinist and Arminian theologies and their concepts of the unpardonable sin's relationship to God's sovereignty and foreknowledge, especially in regard to the role of the human will. It is therefore important

to examine the impact of Calvinist monergism/compatibilism and Arminian synergism/non-compatibilism on the doctrine of the sin against the Holy Spirit. These issues lie at the heart of the doctrine of salvation, divine morality, and human accountability.

While a divergence of views is not unusual within Christian thought, it seems no unified understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit exists, especially when underlying theologies are taken into account. While the terms “unpardonable sin” and “the sin against the Holy Spirit” appear in over three thousand dissertations, most references are made in passing and are in the context of dissertations written on the topic of literature—especially in connection with either Hawthorne or Marlow. Others refer to the unpardonable sin in world economics. In regard to those dissertations that are based on either biblical or theological research, most mention the sin against the Holy Spirit only in passing. There are relatively few dissertations whose main subject focuses on the unpardonable sin. Those that do are footnoted below.⁸⁷ None of them address the topic from the perspective of the Calvinist and Arminian divide over compatibilism and non-compatibilism, monergism and synergism.

G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White have been selected as representatives of compatibilism and non-compatibilism for several reasons. Both authors were prolific writers of theology (Berkouwer of systematic theology and White as one who wrote her theology in primarily narrative form), and both made significant contributions pertaining

⁸⁷David Neal Roberts, “Selected ‘Unpardonable Sin’ Texts: A History of Their Exegesis in the Early Church to A.D. 451” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977); William W. Combs, “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1985); Dale Charlton Castleman, “An Historical and Critical Evaluation of the Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian College, 1963); Ronald E. Edwards, “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: Mark 3:29-30” (M.A. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1973); C. Adrian Thomas, “A Case for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006).

to the doctrine of the unpardonable sin. Compatibilism and G. C. Berkouwer are examined in advance of non-compatibilism and Ellen G. White in that Calvin and the Reformed tradition preceded the Arminian one. Berkouwer was a leading mind in Reformed theology in the twentieth century and “a total of forty-two students obtained their doctorates under his sponsorship and guidance.”⁸⁸ On the other hand, Ellen G. White “is the most translated American author of either gender.”⁸⁹

Methodology

In that the terminology adopted by compatibilists and non-compatibilists regarding the unpardonable sin does not unveil the stark differences between their theologies, this dissertation focuses on how their respective theologies impact their perceptions of the unpardonable sin. This study briefly surveys a selection of Calvinist and Arminian theologians who had an influence on G. C. Berkouwer and E. G. White. Furthermore, it provides a more detailed examination of Berkouwer and White as the primary representatives of compatibilism and non-compatibilism in the study.

The first chapter of the dissertation introduces the subject of the sin against the Holy Spirit by means of the dissertation proposal. The second chapter provides a brief overview of the relevant biblical passages normally considered in discussions regarding the sin against the Holy Spirit. The chapter also includes a brief survey of Calvinist understanding of the unpardonable sin from the perspectives of compatibilism as

⁸⁸Al Vanderheide, “Dutch Reformed Leader Dr. G. C. Berkouwer Passes Away,” *Internet Christian Library*, February 10, 1996, accessed April 29, 2014, www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/reformed/archive96/nr96-016.txt

⁸⁹Arthur L. White, “Ellen G. White: A Brief Biography,” *The Ellen G. White Estate*, accessed April 29, 2014, <http://www.whiteestate.org/about/egwbio.asp#who>

understood by John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck. This is followed by a brief survey of non-compatibilist views of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit from the perspectives of Arminius, John Wesley, and Adam Clark. The chapter concludes with a brief survey of contemporary scholars regarding the unpardonable sin.

Chapter 3 provides a survey of Berkouwer's doctrine of the sin against the Holy Spirit. It includes discussion of his theology as that theology impacts on his understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Chapter 4 provides a similar survey of White's doctrine of the sin against the Holy Spirit on the same basis.

Chapter 5 provides a comparison of Berkouwer and White. This chapter takes the format of: (1) a descriptive analysis of their positions; and (2) a theological comparison of them (this will include similarities and differences). The dissertation concludes with chapter 6, which provides a critical evaluation of their positions based upon their understanding of the sovereignty of God and free human will. The chapter evaluates the internal coherence of their positions and within Scripture.

Scope and Delimitations

The study begins with a general overview and brief survey of the biblical passages generally associated with the sin against the Holy Spirit/unpardonable sin (Matt 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10). The dissertation examines the works of Berkouwer and White as they relate to the topic of the sin against the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the dissertation does not attempt to provide detailed definitions of the sin against the Holy Spirit, for the study is comparative in nature as it attempts to underscore the impact of compatibilist and non-compatibilist theology on the unpardonable sin as it raises questions pertaining to the doctrine of salvation and the character of God.

CHAPTER 2

ANTECEDENTS TO BERKOUWER AND WHITE

ON THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

This chapter commences with a brief survey of New Testament scholars and theologians on the three synoptic texts that directly address the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28-30; and Luke 12:10). Next it examines the theologians within the compatibilist/Calvinist tradition who most influenced G. C. Berkouwer regarding the unpardonable sin.¹ Then I provide an overview of non-compatibilist/Arminian scholars who preceded Ellen G. White.² Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of the conclusions drawn.

Thus this chapter will establish a foundation that chapters 4 and 5 will build upon as they provide theological insight into the positions that G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White held on this topic—determining whether they well represent respectively the Calvinist and the Arminian approach to the unpardonable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. Then, in chapter 6, I will be able to use them to compare the positions of these two approaches and to determine whether one of these schools of theological thought better

¹This segment begins with a brief look at Calvinist thought and then moves to discussion of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.

²A qualification for the inclusion of non-compatibilist thinkers of this period has been based on their having discussed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. James Arminius, John Wesley, Adam Clark, and Albert Barnes have been included.

fits the teachings of Scripture regarding this subject than does the other.

Antecedents to G. C. Berkouwer on the Unpardonable Sin

The purpose of examining antecedents to G. C. Berkouwer on the unpardonable sin is to determine whether or not he is consistent with existing compatibilist thought and can stand as an adequate representative of Calvinism on the unpardonable sin. A survey of the positions of John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck are thus important in examining the impact on Berkouwer of Calvinism as it pertains to the unpardonable sin.

Both Kuyper and Bavinck preceded Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam³ and had an impact on his theology. Gerrit Berkouwer wrote a significant number of articles on Kuyper,⁴ including three critiques.⁵ In 1933, he wrote a series of

³Gary L. Watts, "G.C. Berkouwer," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, 194; Robert G. Clouse, "Herman Bavinck," *The Twentieth-Century Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 46.

⁴Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, "Dr. A. Kuyper, Osiander en de Dordtsche Synode," *GTT* 31 (June 1930): 73-82; "Dr. Kuyper 'Doopersch'?" *WK* 24, no. 49 (1932): 2; "Herinneringen aan Dr. Kuyper," *WK* 26, no. 13 (1934): 2; "Doctor Kuyper en pater Bendsdorp," *WK* 27, no. 2 (1935): 2; "Dr. Kuyper als polemist," *GTT* 38 (1937): 464-483; "Wat is Kuyper-herdenking?" *WK* 29, no. 34 (1937): 1; "Kuyper en Gunning," *WK* 29, no. 36 (1937): 1; "Kohlbrugge en Kuyper (1)," *CalvWb* 5 (1940): 208v; "Kohlbrugge en Kuyper (2, Slot)," *CalvWb* 5 (1940): 216; "Kuyper," *WK* 33, no. 12 (1941): 2; "Zwart maken? Een citaat van Kuyper" *GW* 2 (1946): 123; "Een promotie over Kuyper" *GW* 3 (1947): 98; "Oud licht over Kuyper en Bavinck (1)," *GW* 3 (1947): 185v; "Oud licht over Kuyper en Bavinck (2)," *GW* 3 (1947): 193v; "Oud licht over Kuyper en Bavinck (3)," *GW* 3 (1948): 225; "Oud licht over Kuyper en Bavinck (4)," *GW* 3 (1948): 233; "De schuld van Kuyper?" *GW* 5 (1950): 274; "Kuyper's beroep op Calvin," *GW* 7 (1951): 41; "Een word van Kuyper," *GW* 14 (1958): 145; "Een word van Kuyper (2, Slot)," *GW* 14 (1958): 153.

⁵Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, "O. de Moor en A.M. de Moor-Ringnalda, Een Maassluiser jongen wordt Minister-President. Het leven van Dr. Abraham Kuyper," *WK* 29, no. 9 (1937): 2; "A. Kuyper, Twaalf patriarchen, Kampen 1936," *WK* 29, no. 15 (1937): 2; "K. de Groot, Kohlbrugge en Kuyper in hun wederzijds contact Barn 1956," *GW* 11 (1956): 377.

articles on the impact of Dutch neo-Calvinism on Kuyper's theology.⁶ He also wrote numerous articles on Bavinck.⁷

In discussion on the divide between Calvinism and Arminianism as it pertains to the unpardonable sin, God's character and His sovereign will stand out as two central issues.⁸ Calvinism claims that to deny God a total sovereign will strips Him of His godness.⁹ Unconditional election claims that in His sovereign grace, God has "chosen to rescue certain specific fallen sinners from their helpless condition while leaving the rest of humanity to perish eternally." God's choice of whom to save is entirely unconditional and is independent of His foreknowledge of a person's faith and obedience. "Christ died only for the elect persons whom [the Father] has chosen unconditionally to save, rather than for all persons alike." His "death covers all the sins of the elect and is therefore effective to save all persons for whom he died." Since His atonement is effective in this way, if He had died for all, all would be saved, but they are not. Therefore His

⁶Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, "Abraham Kuyper en de theologie van het Hollandsche Neocalvinisme (1)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 161v; "(2)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 169v; "(3)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 177v; "(4)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 185v; "(5)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 193v; "(6)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 201v; "(7)" in *Ref. 13* (1932-1933), 209v.

⁷Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, "In strijd met het zesde gebod? Bavinck's conclusie," *WK* 30, no. 42 (1938): 1v; "Bavinck over Genesis," *WK* 41, no. 40 (1939): 2; "Oud licht over Kuyper en Bavinck (1); (2); (3); (4)," *GW* 3 (1948): 233; "Bavinck, de Vrije Universiteit en de tragiek," *GW* 9 (1954): 257; "Het antwoord van Bavinck," *GW* 9 (1954): 265; "Bavinck over het gebed (Pelagius of Augustinus?)," *GW* 9 (1954): 313; "Bavinck over de zekerheid des geloofs," *GW* 10 (1954): 188; "Dr. H. Bavinck," *Trou* (1854): 1; "Herman Bavinck (van strijd en overwinning)," *Trou* (1954): 9; "Bavinck als dogmaticus (1)," *GW* 11 (1955): 1; "Bavinck als dogmaticus (2)," *GW* 11 (1955): 9; "Bavinck als dogmaticus (3)," *GW* 11 (1955): 17; "Bavinck als dogmaticus (4)," *GW* 11 (1955): 25; "Bavinck als dogmaticus (5)," *GW* 11 (1955): 33 and 40; "De waarschuwing van H. Bavinck," *GW* 20 (1964): 9; "Een pleidooi voor aansluiting bij Bavinck," *Trou* (1968): 7; [with H. Ridderbos] "Naschrift bij een reeks van drie artikelen van D. J. Couvee over Bavinck en de Schriftkritiek," *GW* 27 (1972): 311.

⁸Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 9.

⁹*Ibid.*, 47.

“atonement is limited in this respect to the elect.”¹⁰ D. A. Carson claims the “world” Jesus speaks of in John 3:16 refers to the “elect” within the world.¹¹ Thus one can argue that God “reserves his love for the elect alone.”¹² In order to sustain this view, it can be argued that the elect may, by divine example, reserve their love only for the elect.¹³

Not all Calvinists are comfortable with this position. Some hold that Christ died for all, but in doing so, He “died for the elect in a different sense than he died for the non-elect.”¹⁴ While God loves and wishes to save all, His salvation is not available to all. Carson believes that through His sovereign will, God is selective in His distribution of grace. Love compels Him to invite all to believe and repent, but does not provide the reprobate with the ability to respond appropriately.¹⁵

Calvinist James White argues that one cannot include God’s withholding judgment from a wicked man within the specter of His love unless He does everything in His power to save that person. If God does not do all in His power and the individual remains lost, then one could argue that He is no greater than His creatures. Then, like God, we may “rightly and properly discriminate in our love.” Since God is not less than man, compatibilists argue that He (like man) demonstrates different kinds of love toward His creation. Love cannot be redemptive if man has the final say in his destiny, which speaks to a coordinate relationship. “God is under no obligation to extend His grace to the

¹⁰Ibid., 11.

¹¹D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 17.

¹²Walls and Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, 52.

¹³James White, “Calvinism Affirmed,” *Debating Calvinism* (Sister, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 17.

¹⁴Walls and Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, 12.

¹⁵Ibid., 54.

rebel sinner” or to “grant ‘chances.’”¹⁶ To allow man freedom of the will would make God’s rule a democracy, limiting God to human decision.¹⁷ This is a position not difficult to understand if one accepts Bavinck’s position that Calvin “made a clear distinction between the religious and ethical life.”¹⁸

Irresistible grace holds that if “God unconditionally elects who will be saved as a matter of his sovereign will, and if the atonement of Christ is effective in that it ensures the salvation of all persons for whom Christ died, then it follows naturally that the elect will not be able to resist God’s sovereign choice to save them.” The “elect cannot fail to respond positively to God’s grace.” If so, then God “forces himself on the elect and their freedom is destroyed in the process.” Calvinists argue that grace does not force itself on the will but changes the will so that “sinners willingly and gladly respond.”¹⁹ Walls and Dongell state that an appropriate response can occur only as the result of a predestined, unilateral, and transforming decree of God. Therefore, to reject God does not mean resistance to God in that God’s will has not been exercised in favor of the non-elect to begin with.²⁰

This brings us to the two theologians who, apart from Karl Barth, had the most significant influence on G. C. Berkouwer’s theology. The first of them was Abraham Kuyper, the second is Herman Bavinck.

¹⁶Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷Ibid., 36.

¹⁸Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003-2008), 3:527.

¹⁹Walls and Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, 12.

²⁰Ibid., 56.

Abraham Kuyper

Kuyper is unequivocal that the unpardonable sin cannot be committed by a child of God. Hardening of the heart may lead to the unpardonable sin and happens when the love of God fails.²¹ The unpardonable sin works like a cancer on the proud spirit, opposing the Lord, the Spirit, and His holy ordinances. To boast of God's partiality, or the minding of high things, and the reliance upon exalted experiences should be viewed as indications of this sin.²²

For Kuyper, the unpardonable sin is not committed by one with a broken or contrite heart or by one earnestly desiring to be "persuaded by the Savior's love," but by those "who, beholding the beauty and majesty of the Lord, turn the light into darkness and deem the highest glory of the Son of God's love to belong to Satan." The sin is committed directly against divinity, rather than against divinity through sinning against humanity. It is not committed by "ordinary wanderers from God." Two ingredients are needed for the unpardonable sin's commission. First, "close contact with the glory which is manifest in Christ or in His people." Second, it is "not mere contempt of that glory, but the declaration that the Spirit which manifests itself in that glory . . . is a manifestation of Satan." The sin is both willful and malicious, betraying "*systematic* opposition to God." At this point God has lost the "last remnant in the sinner, the taste for . . . and . . . *possibility* of receiving grace."²³

Kuyper writes further: "Hence this word of Jesus is divinely intended to put souls

²¹Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 608-609.

²²Ibid., 611-612.

²³Ibid.

on their guard; the souls of the *saints* lest they treat the Word of God coldly, carelessly, indifferently; the souls of *false* shepherds and *deceivers* of the people who, ministering in the holy mysteries of the cross, contemptuously speak of the “blood theology”—blaspheming the supremest manifestation of divine love as an unrighteous abomination; the souls of *all* who have forsaken the way, who once knew the truth and now reject it, and who in their self-conceit decry their still believing brethren as ignorant fanatics.” Kuyper connects his position to predestination through a twofold exhortation. He calls on professed believers to refrain from tempting the reprobate to fall into sin. He also warns against viewing skepticism as a tool to arrive at truth in that skepticism is the “fatal gate by which the sinner enters upon the awful sin against the Holy Spirit.”²⁴

Herman Bavinck

Bavinck rejects the Roman Catholic distinctions between venial and mortal sins. He believes all sins can ultimately be mortal and embraces what he regards as the biblical category. By definition this occurs when one denies the conviction of his own heart and consciously and willfully blasphemes the Holy Spirit by putting God in Satan’s place and Satan in God’s place—doing so is a demonic posture; a pure and conscious hatred of God and His work. For this there can be no forgiveness.²⁵ In principle, breaking one commandment makes one guilty of breaking all (Matt 5:17-19). God’s law makes a claim on the totality of man (Matt 22:37). “Sin is not a quantity that, isolated from the perpetrator of it, can be counted on one’s fingers and weighed in a scale.”²⁶

²⁴Ibid., 612.

²⁵Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:127.

²⁶Ibid., 3:154.

Bavinck confines the unpardonable sin to the confrontation between Christ and the Pharisees (Matt 12:31; Mark 3:29; and Luke 12:10). The Pharisees became enraged by the claim that Jesus was the son of David, the Christ. This led them to attribute the works of divinity to Satan. Inspired by hatred, the sin bred “from pure, conscious, and intentional hostility. The antithesis between Jesus and the Pharisees has here reached its moment of maximum tension.” While not attempting to determine whether the sin had already been committed, he views it as conscious, deliberate, and intentional.²⁷

For Bavinck, the unpardonable sin is not merely a matter of unbelief, a general resisting of the Holy Spirit, a denial of Christ’s divinity, nor even sinning against one’s better judgment. The sin is not against the law, per se, or against the gospel when most clearly manifest. The unpardonable sin is preceded by both an objective and subjective reality. Objectively, it is by a revelation of God’s grace in Christ, and the nearness of His kingdom. Its subjective reality is evident by an “illumination and conviction of the mind so intense and powerful that one cannot deny the truth of God and has to acknowledge it as being divine.” The sin’s second subjective reality is that it “then consists in a conscious and deliberate attribution of what has been clearly perceived as God’s work to the influence and activity of Satan.” This reality is compounded by its motivation, which is “conscious and intentional hatred against God and what is recognized as divine; its essence is sin in its ultimate manifestation . . . putting God in the place of Satan and Satan in the place of God.”²⁸

Thus, for Bavinck, it has become demonic in character. While God’s grace is not

²⁷Ibid., 3:155.

²⁸Ibid., 3:156.

incapable of forgiving such a sin, there are laws that God instilled and maintains. With remorse eliminated and the conscience closed, the sinner grows hardened. Thus the sin is unpardonable.²⁹

Herman Bavinck argues that while this sin is not directly mentioned outside of the Synoptic Gospels, there are other circumstances in which it can be committed. First, Heb 6:4-8 speaks of those “who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit.” Bavinck ties this passage to a “falling back into Judaism,” thus holding the Son of God up to contempt and crucifying Him afresh. This is unpardonable. Second, 1 John 5:16 speaks of a sin that by virtue of its very nature leads to death without conversion taking place. He sees this sin as a deliberate denial of Christ as the incarnate Son of God. For him, these two sins are coincidental to the unpardonable sin.³⁰ This sin is deliberate.

Bavinck recognizes Heb 6:4-8; 10:26-31; and 2 Pet 2:1 as obstacles to Calvinist positions regarding the perseverance of the saints. He nevertheless explains the obstacle away as an illusion by defining the sin to be a particular sin from which one may be restored after being lost. He then adds that such a sin has merely to do with hardening. He places the unpardonable sin clearly within the structures of Calvinist compatibilism.³¹

Bavinck recognizes the choice between Calvinist compatibilism and non-compatibilism, yet holds to the immutability of God’s foreknowledge, “then finally only

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 3:156-157.

³¹Ibid., 4:268.

those are saved whom God has eternally known would be, and the human will cannot undo the certainty of the outcome.”³²

Bavinck rejects non-compatibilism and claims the Old Testament covenant of grace to be independent of human involvement. He rests his case on God’s compassion. Continual unfaithfulness leaves God unmoved and the covenant and promises intact.³³

Antecedents to Ellen G. White on the Unpardonable Sin

Three theologians have been selected to provide an antecedent backdrop to the theological thinking of Ellen G. White. John Wesley is the first, in that White came out of early Methodism, and so was a product of its theological world view. A prominent Methodist theologian who followed Wesley, yet preceded White, who added to the discussion on the sin against the Holy Spirit was Adam Clark. Finally, Albert Barnes’s commentary series was a favorite of White’s. Barnes was editor and primary author of *Barnes’ Notes on the Old and New Testaments*. As a clergyman in Philadelphia from the mid-1820s, he was part of the great awakening of the 1840s.³⁴ His commentary series was a valued part of the library of Ellen G. White and a favorite resource to her.³⁵

³²Ibid., 4:268-269.

³³Ibid., 269.

³⁴Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 376.

³⁵Ellen G. White to William C. White, August 1, 1897, Letter 194, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI; idem to James Edson and Emma White, June 5, 1899, Letter 243, 1899, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

Use of the Biblical Text

Wesley argues Matt 12:31, 32 and Mark 3:28, 29 do not prevent restoration of backsliders. While blasphemy is unpardonable, he argues an alternate meaning to these texts based on the nature of things. God's nature and operations should not be understood in the context of earthly things, for His compassions do not fail for He will abundantly pardon.³⁶ Many apostates find His mercy, yet those guilty of the sin (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28, 29) have no mercy.³⁷ Thus for Wesley, one who at one time has been deemed righteous by God, and in good conscience, may finally fall from grace and make shipwreck of faith. For this reason Paul exhorts Timothy to hold fast his faith. Therefore, he argues that those once grafted into the good olive-tree (spiritual and invisible Church) may finally fall (Rom 11:17), just as those who are branches of the true vine (Christ) may (John 15:1) also fall.³⁸

While Calvinists claim Paul speaks of two categories of people—those who live by faith and those who draw back to perdition—Wesley sees only one category, from which some draw back, thus creating two categories from an original one.³⁹ Salvation is conditional, based on the writings of Moses, the prophets, Christ, and the apostles. Man's only recourse is God's grace, except for those who willfully resist and quench the Holy

³⁶John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 26 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), 6:516-519.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 6:523-525.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 10:244-247.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 10:250-251.

Spirit.⁴⁰ For this reason Wesley implores, “Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall.”⁴¹

For Wesley, those who have been sealed by the Holy Spirit are able to grieve Him by: (a) conversation that does not edify or minister grace; (b) through wrath and a lack of empathy; (c) anger and a want of brotherly forgiveness; (d) contention; and (e) evil-speaking, whispering, tale-bearing, and fault-finding (all listed in Gal 5:19-21).⁴²

John Wesley makes use of the experiences of Hophni and Phineas as well as those of Esau and Judas to establish his arguments concerning the unpardonable sin. Following is a summary of his thoughts concerning these individuals.

Biographical Examples

Hophni and Phineas

Wesley changes the text of the KJV from, “They hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them,” to “Therefore the Lord was about to slay them.” A more accurate rendition would read, “The Lord would not suffer their horrid and stubborn wickedness to escape unpunished; but because of that wickedness, he slew them both in one day, by the hand of the Philistines.” Thus their sin was not in order that God should slay them, but He did so because they had sinned. Their sin was “the more inexcusable” in that it was not done in ignorance. The degree of the sin’s wickedness and the enormity of its offense in the eyes of the worshippers also made it inexcusable.⁴³

⁴⁰Ibid., 10:254.

⁴¹Ibid., 10:298.

⁴²Ibid., 11:424.

⁴³Ibid., 7:176.

Esau and Judas

Wesley points out that the text, “Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated,” refers to their prosperities rather than their persons. If Esau and Judas are eternally damned, it will be due to unbelief, for one is saved by faith alone in Christ.⁴⁴

Facilitators of the Unpardonable Sin

Nothing, for Wesley, demonstrates greater enmity for the love of God than anger at others. “If we give way to the spirit of offence but one hour, we lose the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit; so that, instead of amending them, we destroy ourselves, and become an easy prey to the enemy who assaults us.”⁴⁵ The refusal to part with a treasured sin keeps an individual “dead in trespasses and sins,” leading to the hardening of a person’s heart.⁴⁶

Role of Conscience

It is difficult, according to Wesley, to quench the Holy Spirit, yet man remains capable of continuing into sin without remorse. However, a man’s conscience may be forced until he goes mad, which is preferable to quenching the Spirit of God.⁴⁷

Safeguards against the Unpardonable Sin

Wesley sees three safeguards against the unpardonable sin: (1) devotion to God; (2) consistent self-denial; and (3) Christ living in the believer. Each safeguard is a

⁴⁴Ibid., 10:265.

⁴⁵Ibid., 6:82.

⁴⁶Ibid., 6:110.

⁴⁷Ibid., 8:132.

consequence of its predecessor. One must live within the divine will through taking up one's cross daily and drawing ever nearer to God. To do so, one must die to the world and be crucified with Christ that He might live instead. This fulfills the first step of the law. We then grow in Christ's joy and perfection, and in love for all mankind.⁴⁸

Adam Clark

Adam Clark was a prominent Methodist theologian whose works followed John Wesley and yet preceded the period known as the great awakening. His writings were prevalent in Ellen White's day. Clark categorizes the unpardonable sin as "ascribing the miracles of Christ, wrought by the power of God, to the spirit of the devil." He holds that it is impossible to commit the sin while believing in Christ's divine mission.⁴⁹ Most of his discussion on the topic is in relation to the textual evidence.

Use of the Biblical Text

Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-30 refer to impious speaking against the Holy Spirit. The unpardonable sin is committed when one obstinately attributes the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan after having full evidence to the contrary. Clark categorizes this high among presumptuous sins (see: Num 15:30, 31; 35:31; Lev 20:10; 1 Sam 2:25).⁵⁰

Grieving the Holy Spirit

Because the Holy Spirit is sent to rational human beings, the Spirit's work is not irresistible. Clark writes that the Holy Spirit works upon human understanding, man's

⁴⁸Ibid., 14:270-271.

⁴⁹Adam Clark, *Christian Theology* (New York, Carlton and Porter, 1835), 105.

⁵⁰Adam Clark, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1938), 5:137-138.

will, judgment, and conscience to enlighten, convince, and persuade. If the understanding and conscience refuse to “behold the light; the will determines to remain obstinate; the judgment purposes to draw false inferences; and the conscience hardens itself against every check and remonstrance” (something only possible for a rational soul). When the Holy Spirit is resisted, He is grieved. The result is that the sinner is left to reap the fruit of his actions. Forced belief and salvation would change the essential principles of God’s creation and “the nature of mind, and reduce him into the state of a machine, the *vis inertiae* of which was to be overcome and conducted by a certain quantum of physical force, superior to that resistance which would be the natural effect of the certain quantum of the *vis inertiae* possessed by the subject on and by which this agent was to operate.”⁵¹

Role of Conscience

All have a conscience by which the Holy Spirit enlightens, convicts, strengthens, brings men back to God, and fits them for glory. Clark states that all may be saved by attending to the convictions of conscience: a form of unmerited grace. Thus, all people are partakers of God’s grace. Yet many “partakers of this heavenly gift” sin “against it, lose it, and perish everlastingly through abuse of the gift.”⁵² Clark adds that it is dangerous to trifle with even an erroneous conscience. One should instruct it and win it over. “Its feelings should be respected, because they ever refer to God.” The one who sins against conscience in areas of little importance, will soon sin against it in “things in

⁵¹Clark, *Christian Theology*, 162-163.

⁵²Ibid., 398-399.

which his salvation is most intimately concerned.” A well-informed conscience is a blessing and a poor conscience is better than no conscience at all.⁵³

Clark argues that a conscience may be over-tender and unreliable (extremes “generally beget extremes”), and can be suppressed for a period, as with Joseph’s brothers. Yet God endeavors through circumstance to bring reflection and turn the conscience once more into an instrument of salvation. Yet if not heard, the consequence of disregarded conscience will be unquenchable fire.⁵⁴

Conscience is a “faculty of the mind, capable of receiving light and information” from the Holy Spirit. What the eye is to the body, the conscience is to the soul. It receives rather than is the spiritual light of the soul.” Conscience is enlightened by the Holy Spirit; this is how the Spirit “beareth witness with our spirits,” doing it to the “degree of light communicated, of condemnation, pardon, or acquaintance.”⁵⁵ The conscience can be good, bad, tender, or seared, depending on whether and how it functions. With the grieving of the Spirit, the conscience ceases to dispense light and fails to pass correct self-judgment. “A darkened, seared, or hardened conscience is that which has little or none of this divine light; the soul having by repeated transgressions so grieved the Spirit of God, that it has withdrawn its light, [consequently] the man feels no remorse, but goes on in repeated acts of transgression, unaffected . . . by threatenings or promises; and careless about the destruction which awaits [him]. . . .” This is the consequence of

⁵³Ibid., 399.

⁵⁴Ibid., 399-400.

⁵⁵Ibid., 396-397.

resisting the Spirit, for the Holy Spirit can only operate in tandem with the conscience.⁵⁶

Albert Barnes

Albert Barnes argues the Pharisees had already committed the “awful” sin mentioned in Matt 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-30. The unpardonable sin is “a direct insult, abuse, or evil speaking against the Holy Ghost—the spirit by which Jesus worked his miracles.” He understands the “Holy Ghost” in Matt 12:31-32 and Mark 2:28-29 to refer, not to the Holy Spirit (whom he fully recognizes to be a member of the Trinity and equal with the Father and the Son⁵⁷), but to the “*divine nature* of Christ—the power by which he wrought his miracles.” He thus interprets the passage to claim that he “that speaks against me as a man of Nazareth—that speaks contemptuously of my humble birth, &c., may be pardoned; but he that reproaches my divine nature, charging me with being in league with Satan, and blaspheming the power of God manifestly displayed *by me*, can never obtain forgiveness.”⁵⁸ One who stoops to such blasphemy is in danger of “eternal damnation” (recognized by Barnes to mean that one remains forever unpardoned). God “*will* not forgive a sin so direct, presumptuous, and awful.”⁵⁹ Barnes asserts that the Pharisees’ taking offense at Christ’s upbringing and earthly roots were pardonable, as

⁵⁶Ibid., 397-398.

⁵⁷Albert Barnes, “Matthew and Mark,” *Barnes’ Notes*, ed. Robert Frew, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 9:29.

⁵⁸i.e., there are “*no possible circumstances* in which the offender could obtain forgiveness.” Ibid., 9:132.

⁵⁹Barnes, “Matthew and Mark,” *Barnes’ Notes*, 9:132.

was their doubting His divinity. Their sin was that of “a wanton and blasphemous attack on the divine power and nature of Christ. Such a sin God would not forgive.”⁶⁰

Barnes understood all sins to be pardonable after repentance. However, the unpardonable sin is a rejection of the “highest displays of God’s mercy and power.” Christ’s accusers identified these displays as the work of the devil. The Pharisees’ sin required the “deepest depravity of the mind.” Such sin, by its nature, includes injurious or evil speaking against God. Continuation in the unpardonable sin prevents forgiveness (Mark 16:16; Rom 2:6-9).⁶¹

Conclusions

In providing a brief survey of contemporary commentary on the synoptic texts that address the unpardonable sin (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28-30; and Luke 12:10), it has been noted that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit must be understood within various contexts. These contexts include the immediate preceding texts⁶² and the texts that follow immediately after the recorded dialogue.⁶³ However, a broader context also exists. The synoptic texts may also be understood in conjunction with the Old Testament teachings

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Mark places the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit discourse immediately after the choosing of the twelve (Mark 3:13-19), while Luke places the discourse right after His pronouncing woes on the Pharisees (Luke 11:37-52; 12:1-9).

⁶³Immediately after the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit discourse, Matthew has Jesus speaking about a tree being known by its fruit, the words one uses, and the desire of the wicked for signs (Matt 12:33-45). Mark places Jesus’ mother and brothers attempting to silence Him (Mark 3:31); and Luke has Christ warning His followers that they will be brought before councils (Luke 12:11-12) and addresses the sin of covetousness (Luke 12:13-34).

pertaining to deliberate, defiant sin against God and His ordinances. These sins were regarded as blasphemy.⁶⁴

It has been demonstrated that the tongue may indicate the presence of the sin by claiming the powers of darkness as the catalyst for Christ's healing ministry.⁶⁵ Each commentator surveyed provides personal interpretations of what constitutes the sin against the Holy Spirit.

In summary of compatibilist understanding of the unpardonable sin, it has been argued that the unpardonable sin must be comprehended within the framework of God's total sovereignty.⁶⁶ This raises questions regarding the divine character. First, God has "chosen to rescue certain specific fallen sinners from their helpless condition while leaving the rest of humanity to perish eternally." This determination is unconditional and independent of personal faith and obedience.⁶⁷ Second, Christ "died for the elect in a different sense than He died for the non-elect."⁶⁸ While God loves and wishes to save all, His salvation is not available to all. While love compels Him to invite all to believe and repent, it does not provide the reprobate with the ability to respond appropriately.⁶⁹ Third, God must be understood within the context of man in his fallen state, since "God is not

⁶⁴Wilkins, "Matthew," 448-449; R. T. France, "Matthew," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 210.

⁶⁵Knight, *The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier: Matthew*, 140; Berkouwer, *Sin*, 316-317; Ellen G. White, "Our Words—No. 1," *RH*, January 18, 1898, 37-38; idem, MS 73, 1897.

⁶⁶Walls and Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, 9.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 54.

less than man.”⁷⁰ Fourth, man is unable to resist God’s decision. Compatibilists argue this is not the result of force but of God changing the individual to achieve His predetermined result.⁷¹ Finally, to reject God does not mean resistance to God in that God’s will has not been exercised in favor of the non-elect to begin with.⁷²

The writer has pointed out that in his arguments pertaining to the unpardonable sin, Abraham Kuyper claims the unpardonable sin cannot be committed by a child of God. The sin is committed directly against divinity, rather than via humanity. Two aspects of the unpardonable sin involve close exposure to the glory of God and the claim that such glory is a manifestation of Satan. The sin is both willful and malicious, betraying “*systematic* opposition to God.”⁷³

It has been shown that Herman Bavinck confines the unpardonable sin to the confrontation between Christ and the Pharisees (Matt 12:31; Mark 3:29; and Luke 12:10).⁷⁴ It has also been made evident that he appears to digress from his compatibilist roots by arguing his position of subjective reality, for any human subjectivity cannot be divorced from human involvement. His difficulty is that he writes of a human “denial that contradicts the conviction of the mind,” an “illumination of the conscience.” He suggests there is a *becomingness* to the sin which results in a loss of remorse and conscience,

⁷⁰Ibid., 18-19.

⁷¹Ibid., 12.

⁷²Ibid., 56.

⁷³Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 608-609. Herman Bavinck concurs that the unpardonable sin occurs when one denies the conviction of one’s own heart and consciously and willfully blasphemes the Holy Spirit by putting God in Satan’s place and Satan in God’s place. This condition is the result of pure and conscious hatred of God and his work. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:127. Bavinck also agrees that the sin is inspired by hatred, and is conscious, deliberate, and intentional. Ibid., 3:155.

⁷⁴Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:155.

resulting in a hardening.⁷⁵ Though admitting a direct human involvement, we have seen that he places the unpardonable sin within the structures of Calvinist compatibilism, thus rejecting non-compatibilism.⁷⁶

Wesley's understanding that one who once was righteous may eventually "make shipwreck of faith"⁷⁷ has been discussed. Unlike compatibilists who argue for two categories of humanity (the elect and reprobate), Wesley sees one category of humanity that, consequential to personal choice, divides into two categories,⁷⁸ making salvation (or damnation) conditional upon human reaction to divine grace.⁷⁹ It has also been shown that he holds final rejection of divine grace to be difficult.⁸⁰

In examining the position of Adam Clark, it has been noted that due to human rationality the Spirit's work should not be viewed as irresistible. The Holy Spirit works upon human understanding, will, judgment, and conscience to enlighten, convince, and persuade. If human understanding and conscience determine to refuse the Holy Spirit's ministry, the conscience hardens itself. At this juncture the human agent is left to "reap the fruit of his doings." It has been demonstrated that Clark claims divine determinism would "alter the essential principles of [mankind's] creation and the nature of mind, and reduce him into the state of a machine."⁸¹

⁷⁵Ibid., 3:156.

⁷⁶Ibid., 268-269.

⁷⁷Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 10:244-247.

⁷⁸Ibid., 10:250-251.

⁷⁹Ibid., 10:254.

⁸⁰Ibid., 8:132.

⁸¹Clark, *Christian Theology*, 162-163.

We have seen that Albert Barnes underscores non-compatibilist thought by taking the position that individuals are able to personally reject the “highest displays of God’s mercy and power.”⁸² Such personal ownership of sin provides a potential causality to the unpardonable sin.

In chapters 3 and 4 we shall observe how G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White were impacted in their understanding of the unpardonable sin by their theological antecedents. We shall examine their respective compatibilist and non-compatibilist positions.

⁸²Barnes, “Matthew and Mark,” *Barnes’ Notes*, 9:132.

CHAPTER 3

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN: G. C. BERKOUWER

In this chapter Berkouwer's theological assumptions and presuppositions will be briefly surveyed as they influence his understanding of the unpardonable sin. It is important to understand how he correlates biblical hermeneutics with divine determinism in order to accomplish this. Next we examine his understanding of human nature and divine determinism (both election and rejection). These doctrines go to the heart of the question of the integrity of God in the face of the doctrine of a sin that is unpardonable.¹ Moreover, these theological perspectives challenge the sin against the Holy Spirit because of its impact on the integrity of the divine character.

Following the above survey, this chapter takes into account Berkouwer's teaching regarding the human will; the role of faith, justification, sanctification; the perseverance of the saints; the role of the Holy Spirit; and judgment and reward. From these overviews, the chapter summarizes his doctrine of sin and then concludes with an examination of his teaching regarding the unpardonable sin. My comparison of his positions with those of Ellen G. White is presented in chapter 5.

¹Berkouwer's hermeneutics, understanding of human nature, and concepts of divine determinism go to the heart of three of four fundamental questions on which the Christian faith rests. The fourth fundamental question is that of the nature of God, which will be evaluated in the final two chapters of this dissertation.

Theological Assumptions and Presuppositions

Nature of Scripture

Though Berkouwer considers Scripture not to have been written as theology, he does recognize it to be the Word of God. He concurs with the apostles that the Bible is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). Men “spoke from” God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). Men have no right to take away from these words (Rev 22:18-19).² The church is not to be the ultimate and final ground of scriptural belief, for only God Himself can be a sufficient witness to Himself. Thus Scripture “is not subject to human argumentation and proof.”³

Only God provides certainty.⁴ Interpretation is of the essence for true faith in Scripture. For Berkouwer, faith is “intrinsically related to and dependent on the message of Scripture.”⁵ The Bible is the message of salvation.⁶ It is possible for God’s Word to be interpreted so as to pay little or no attention to the intent or mind of the Spirit.⁷ “Chasms may open when Scripture is handled in a way which does not do justice to the meaning and intent of its words. It is even possible to stand within the bounds of Scripture itself and yet to twist it.” He argues that the “result is a darkening of the mind, a closing of the heart, something which boils down to a turning ‘away from listening to the truth’ (2 Tim

²Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 10-12.

³Ibid., 41.

⁴Ibid., 15.

⁵Ibid., 105-106.

⁶Ibid., 109.

⁷Ibid., 107.

4:4); a ceasing to be ‘sound in faith’ (1 Tim 1:13-14).”⁸

Berkouwer says Scripture is often misunderstood because of a lack of willingness to sincerely listen, and because presuppositions can block our path to its understanding.⁹ Even though hermeneutics should not be exposed to arbitrary expositions, and in spite of good hermeneutics being methodical, Scripture is nevertheless faced by the possibilities of being misunderstood. Nevertheless, dogmatic exegesis is important.¹⁰

Berkouwer holds that the message of Scripture comes through the medium of meaningful human language.¹¹ While the gospel is aimed at man, it cannot (in structure and horizon) be hermeneutically approached from human existence.¹²

Berkouwer claims scriptural authority comes from correct interpretation, “according to God’s purpose, when ‘hearing and understanding lead to a heeding and a doing.’”¹³ The dimension of Scriptural authority, trustworthiness, and immutability is *apo theou*, though it does not exclude its human character. “The firmness of these human words is the mystery of the Spirit.”¹⁴ That “Scripture and the prophets are *from God* (2 Pet 1:21; Ezek 2-6) does not rule out the human witness in a divine monergism,” but uniquely includes this witness. God’s Word does not come as a humanless, supernatural miracle, in order to be truly divine, but human voices are heard when God speaks. “The

⁸Ibid., 109.

⁹Ibid., 110.

¹⁰Ibid., 117.

¹¹Ibid., 112.

¹²Ibid., 123.

¹³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴*Apo theou* meaning “from God.” Ibid., 142.

connection between God's speaking and the human word is very close and real."¹⁵

Berkouwer rejects the idea of passive or unconscious writers in the *theopneustos* nature of inspiration.¹⁶ He sees the genuinely human nature of Scripture as being focused on God's speaking "in the manner of men."¹⁷ For him, this is related to "concrete words." This is the meaning of the union between the divine and human. The gift of *theopneustos* occurs only within the circle of revelation. This "mystery" places us before the "mystery of Christ."¹⁸ His summation is that both the scriptural and human witness are essentially connected, adding that calling "Scripture a human witness . . . does not at all mean a separation of Scripture and revelation, but rather an honoring of integral Scripture." This comes through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

Berkouwer proceeds to connect his hermeneutics with divine election. When applied to divine election, Berkouwer posits that one must not "speculate beyond the boundaries which God in His wisdom has set us,"²⁰ stating that just as with all other aspects of hermeneutics, one must take Calvin's position that boundaries must be set in any inquiry into divine election. Even so, at all levels of doctrine and theology it "is possible to come to very different conclusions" over the function of divine election. Berkouwer reiterates that it "is possible to respect the boundary of speaking of election

¹⁵Ibid., 145.

¹⁶*Theopneustos* meaning "God inspired." Ibid., 153.

¹⁷Ibid., 156.

¹⁸Ibid., 159-162.

¹⁹Ibid., 165-166.

²⁰Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, trans. Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 15.

while at the same time trespassing across that boundary, because one may be handling the contents of the gospel in an illegitimate way and yet remain unconscious of his trespassing.” He therefore calls for silence where the Holy Spirit is silent.²¹ Yet even with a correct hermeneutic, one does not necessarily arrive at “agreement regarding the doctrine of election. Therefore, when speaking of the boundaries of our thinking we must remain fully aware of our responsibility to return always to Scripture and to understand its meaning and intention.”²² When one’s outlook on God is warped, everything changes.²³

In summary, Berkouwer argues that the church is not the arbiter of scriptural belief, for Scripture comes from God through the medium of the human agent and with a human character. He acknowledges that it is possible to misinterpret the biblical text or the Holy Spirit’s intent, and pay it no attention. Moreover, we should note that he recognizes the need for certain hermeneutical boundaries when dealing with divine determinism.

Human Nature: Ontology of the Unpardonable Sin

G. C. Berkouwer stands in agreement with John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper that there is no significant difference between being created in God’s image and likeness.²⁴ However, Herman Bavinck did not believe that image and likeness are identical.²⁵

²¹Ibid., 16.

²²Ibid., 23.

²³Ibid., 26.

²⁴John Calvin, *Commentaries*, trans. John King, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 1:92-95; Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 221.

²⁵Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:532.

Berkouwer's view of human nature can be summed up in four concepts: (1) man can exist only in union with God; (2) man must be understood as a unitary whole, without separation between body and soul; (3) human nature has been corrupted; and, (4) God's faithfulness is not ontically anchored in man. He states that man should not be understood as an abstract *idea*, but as an actuality.²⁶ As such, man should be understood only in the light of divine revelation.²⁷ Berkouwer argues that man's creation in God's image is addressed "in the midst of a world of fallen man," and demonstrates that "we may never think of man apart from the original aim of creation." On this basis he asserts that "anyone who attacks his fellow man, or curses him, violates the mysterious essence of man, not because man is *mikrotheos*, or demi-god, but because he is *man*. In all his relations and acts, he is never man-in-himself, but always man-in-relation, in relation to this history of God's deeds in creation, to this origin of an inalienable relation to his Creator."²⁸

Man in Union with God

Berkouwer states that the Holy Spirit works to keep man from viewing himself "as an independent, dynamic unit."²⁹ Man's central, essential dimension is not as an isolated identity, but as a being-in-relation in the presence of God. This "does not concern the start of a way for man to reach God; it means, rather, the overwhelming actuality of

²⁶Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 13.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 21, 30.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 59.

²⁹Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 83. Man's perception of himself as a dynamic and independent unit is indissolubly tied to the doctrine of the radical corruption of human nature.

God in man's life, and man's dependent relationship to Him, from which he can never escape."³⁰ He sees the believer as being in such relation. Scripture never portrays man as neutral or independent. Thus the Bible does not provide an independent ontological portrait of man.³¹ God protects and maintains man. "Scripture does not intend to focus our interest on an *analogia entis* derived more or less directly from what God and man have in common, and in which fallen man retains his likeness to God."³²

Man as a Unitary Whole

For Berkouwer, the unity of the human race rests on the union of body and soul. He rejects an ontic structure of man, or as man in himself.³³ The real concern of Scripture is the whole and actual man "as he stands in God's sight, in the religious bond between the totality of his being and God." He adds: "Scripture never pictures man as a dualistic, or pluralistic being," with higher and lower parts. This is evident in that sin is "never related to one or another part of man in the sense of an anthropologically distinct part, and is never localized in man."³⁴ Any soul and body distinction "is excluded and made unacceptable by the gospel."³⁵ Man does not have neutral parts.³⁶ Nor does his essential nature lie in his reason, as many would distinguish man from animals. He believes the

³⁰Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 33.

³¹*Ibid.*, 196-197.

³²*Ibid.*, 60.

³³*Ibid.*, 288.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 203.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 229.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 30-31.

conflicts regarding the image of God in man should never allow us to forget that Scripture calls us to search for “what we may term . . . *the secret of man*.”³⁷

He claims it is impossible to take Gen 1:26-27; 9:6’s use of the Hebrew *tselem* and *Demuth* as referring to two separate aspects of man (moral and physical similitude), holding that the words are mere synonyms used in repetition. Berkouwer agrees with Bavinck that the two terms are used promiscuously and for no special reason;³⁸ both terms merely reflect a relation between man and his Creator. He sees this as making man unique in creation; a *dominium*, giving lordship over what surrounds, and is subject to him.³⁹ Even so, being in God’s image “should not be sought in this lordship.” Thus “the pattern of human life is analogous to that of the divine life.” Berkouwer’s analogy is “the *tertium comparationis* (third comparison), and the meaning of God’s ‘image and likeness’ in man.”⁴⁰

Corruption of Human Nature

For Berkouwer, man is unique in his relation to evil; for it cannot be regarded by stressing its anonymity in that it is continually evident in concrete and localized form.⁴¹ Man remained the work of God after the Fall: “God remains the Creator, and fallen man is not simply sin itself. Otherwise God would be the creator of sin. Furthermore, Christ could not have partaken of our nature if it was *essentially* sinful. Thus there is a

³⁷Ibid., 34-35.

³⁸Ibid., 87.

³⁹Ibid., 69-70.

⁴⁰Ibid., 71.

⁴¹Ibid., 13.

difference between human nature and sin.” The connection between the two is “an accident . . . leaves nothing actually good in any inner or outer power of man,” producing man’s spiritual death, and leaving no room “for minimizing the effect of corruption. But the work of God (our real nature) and that of the devil remain distinct from each other.”⁴² This position is at variance to Kuyper who holds that man completely lost God’s image at the fall (and thus all goodness), yet he provides a contradiction, for evidence of God’s image remained in man.⁴³

Man’s whole existence is affected by the curse of sin.⁴⁴ Fallen man is lost and he can only be sought and found, contributing absolutely nothing to his salvation.⁴⁵ The essence of the New Testament witness is the renewing of the image of God in fallen man.⁴⁶ This extreme change is not from one essence to another, but is the return of man to his true nature. This is evident by the reality that “no matter how deep-seated the differences between men be, *in* Christ the tension and convulsiveness vanish before the new nature.” For Berkouwer, this new relationship is the reality of salvation, the *conformatas* to holiness. In this new life he is no longer a threat to his neighbor or himself. This is the new birth (love, joy, peace, mercy, community), and the essence of the imitation of Christ. Such imitation is “God’s gift restored in Christ.”⁴⁷

⁴²Ibid., 133.

⁴³Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 223.

⁴⁴Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 231.

⁴⁵Ibid., 143-145.

⁴⁶Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷Ibid., 99-101, 103.

The Ontic Problem

God's faithfulness is not ontically anchored in man. God "operates *nevertheless* and *in spite of* man." Nothing can be added to God's faithfulness.⁴⁸ This position needs to be balanced by a seemingly isolated position to the rest of Berkouwer's theology that man should be "viewed in terms of his total life direction."⁴⁹

In summary, Berkouwer argues that man can be understood only in the light of divine revelation and in relationship with God. Man is never independent or neutral. As such, man is a unitary whole consisting of body and soul. Genesis 1:26-27 portrays *tselem* and *Demuth* as mere synonyms that reflect man's relationship with his Creator. Man remains God's handiwork, even after the Fall, and makes no contribution to his salvation; yet biblical soteriology returns man to his true nature (which is the new birth).

Decrees of God: Divine Election and Rejection

Berkouwer is defensive regarding perceptions and implications connected to divine election and rejection. He recognizes that the doctrine "seems to clash with the dignity of man and to make him hardly more than a pawn in the divine decision."⁵⁰ Though Deut 29:29 does not refer to divine election, he holds it to be one of the secret things of God. It can only be spoken of in abstract terms if God's free will (His absolute

⁴⁸Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 222-225.

⁴⁹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 240.

⁵⁰Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 8.

freedom) is separated from His eternal decision.⁵¹ One cannot discuss election without faith.⁵² Divine election is the only way that leads to salvation, and is faith itself.⁵³

Berkouwer argues that election and rejection do not result from one causality. They are not equivalent-parallels “as is demonstrated in the fact that belief is from God, while unbelief is not.”⁵⁴ Election did not originate from man’s merits or creation, but came from “before the foundation of the world,” thus making it free from human arbitrariness and precariousness. For him this is opposed to chance and contingency.⁵⁵ Merit is alien to divine election in that “all men are in the same state of damnation.”⁵⁶

One cannot separate divine election from revelation in Christ.⁵⁷ Finding none worthy, God turned to Christ,⁵⁸ as the means of election’s execution. Berkouwer concurs with Calvin that the love of God is the first cause of our salvation. Yet Christ is not merely a *causa formalis*. Since we obtain justification by faith, the groundwork for our salvation must be sought in Christ, whom God has established as the means for reconciliation.⁵⁹ Salvation is anchored in Christ. The “instrumental and the comprehensive are one in Christ,” connecting at the exclusion of all human merit.⁶⁰

⁵¹Ibid., 12-13.

⁵²Ibid., 25.

⁵³Ibid., 74.

⁵⁴Ibid., 178.

⁵⁵Ibid., 150-151.

⁵⁶Ibid., 181.

⁵⁷Ibid., 132.

⁵⁸Ibid., 142.

⁵⁹Ibid., 140.

⁶⁰Ibid., 149.

It is apparent that Berkouwer is not completely comfortable with his Reformed predecessors regarding the reprobate. While Calvin maintains that God allows the Reprobate to be blind to the truth while giving the Elect new eyes,⁶¹ and Bavinck argues that one's birth is a primary factor in election,⁶² Berkouwer argues otherwise. One's fate is not determined by origin. Divine rejection is due to man's sin.⁶³ God is not responsible for rejection (reprobation): "Election is the fountain of all saving good, and out of it flow the fruits of faith, holiness, and other gifts, and finally to eternal life. This line of thinking is not followed when sin and unbelief are discussed. Rather, man is then indicated as the cause and reason of unbelief."⁶⁴ For Berkouwer, though man does not have a role in his salvation, he definitely has a role to play in his damnation (which is a divine answer to man's sin).⁶⁵ God's "rejection . . . is not arbitrary, obscure act . . . it is clearly His holy reaction against sin." Berkouwer sees "a clear connection between sin and curse, sin and rejection."⁶⁶

Berkouwer maintains that judgment always corresponds to man's sin, and though man is fully responsible for his own sin and resulting judgment, and while the relation between sin and judgment is always present, "behind this causal connection lies another *causa*, another origin: the one of rejection!" This divine rejection is the prime cause of sin

⁶¹Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, 3:253-254.

⁶²Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:400-401.

⁶³Berkouwer, *Sin*, 102.

⁶⁴Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 180.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 184-185.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 183.

and judgment.⁶⁷ A tension exists, for he also makes the argument that “the only thing one can do is to accept without hesitation the symmetry, the parallelism between election and reprobation. It may seem as if faith is ultimately based on the supreme sovereignty with its twofold causality. But actually, the holy, electing and rejecting God has been interposed into a scheme of human causality.”⁶⁸

God’s sovereignty prevents Him from being arbitrary. Berkouwer argues that God cannot be subject to any law beneath Himself. Yet because man is arbitrary and without norm, we cannot understand true arbitrariness, and so should desist from interpreting God’s decrees as such.⁶⁹ The “justification of the unbeliever is not arbitrary . . . [but] is a revelation of the non-arbitrariness of God’s grace without works of the law.”⁷⁰

A tension exists, for Berkouwer claims that “divine action does not correspond to the works of the law,”⁷¹ and then argues that God rejects Israel because of her actions. He then uses Israel’s rejection by God as proof that He is not arbitrary.⁷² The question must be asked as to whether or not man has free use of his will in Berkouwer’s theology.

In summary, Berkouwer posits that faith is required to believe in divine election, for it is one of the secret things of God. Furthermore, divine election is the only means of salvation. While God is responsible for election, He is not responsible for reprobation. Briefly put, man does not have a role in his salvation but has a role in his damnation. The

⁶⁷Ibid., 187-188.

⁶⁸Ibid., 201.

⁶⁹Ibid., 54-55.

⁷⁰Ibid., 75.

⁷¹Ibid., 174.

⁷²Ibid., 77.

prime cause of judgment is divine rejection.

The Human Will

Berkouwer uses the terms *determinism* and *synergism* to discuss the human will. Determinism is God as an overpowering force with man as His pawn. Synergism is a state in which man claims autonomy.⁷³ He rejects both determinism and synergism, holding that, on the one hand, God cannot be dependent on granting salvation based on man's decision. On the other hand, the significance of man's decision (belief or unbelief) must be honored, and not be obscured by God's working all things by Himself.⁷⁴

A tension exists between his view of man's free will being overshadowed by grace, and his free will as a decisive factor. The "either/or" and "both/and" is what he sees as the core of synergism. For Berkouwer this is decisively significant for a true understanding of election.⁷⁵ He rejects the concept that the human will is tied up in a three-way tension between the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and man's free will because of the existence of human activity in the process.⁷⁶ Synergism means accepting "prescience" (*praescientia* or *praevisio*). Accepting prescience mitigates against divine election by "distinguishing between the *voluntas antecedens*"⁷⁷ and the *voluntas consequens*⁷⁸ in election, thereby placing man's freedom to choose and his reaction to the

⁷³Ibid., 25-26.

⁷⁴Ibid., 28.

⁷⁵Ibid., 29-31.

⁷⁶Ibid., 33.

⁷⁷*Voluntas antecedens* meaning "whoever believes is saved."

⁷⁸*Voluntas consequens* meaning "whoever is logical."

offer of salvation between the two wills, as foreknown and foreseen by God, thus forming the basis for *voluntas consequens*. In this, the human reaction “becomes the condition under which election occurs and is realized.”⁷⁹

For Berkouwer, there can be no recognition by God of man’s decision or the function of man as constituent in his salvation. For him, faith does not allow for any human function, but rather relies solely on God’s sovereign grace. Yet he rejects the notion that any accusation of fatalism can be tied to Calvinist theology.⁸⁰

Berkouwer rejects synergism as it recognizes the meritoriousness of good works.⁸¹ Another tension exists for him in that Phil 2:12, 13 accepts the reality of human activity. The divine act provides room for man’s act, something “not absorbed or destroyed by the divine superiority, but created, called forth, by it.”⁸² He recognizes that “Scripture fully honors man’s activity; it calls for it and stimulates it, but never makes it part of a synergistic synthesis.” The relationship between the source of salvation and man’s decision “can never be presented as a co-ordinate relationship, no matter how refined and ingeniously construed it may be. Rather, the sphere of human activity and decision is . . . the exclusive . . . act of God.” Man’s activity is “subject to the gift of grace.”⁸³ Is it possible that Berkouwer sees some margin for free will among believers?⁸⁴

⁷⁹Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 34.

⁸⁰Berkouwer, *Sin*, 116.

⁸¹Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 43-44.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 45-46.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 108.

Though originally free, man lost his freedom at the Fall, and has since experienced a degeneration of freedom. Man commits evil by will, not compulsion. Berkouwer does not like the term “free will” because this would support the view that man determines “his own path and the direction of his whole life in autonomy, as if the man who wills is not a fallen and falling man, whose life’s direction is already decided because of the fall.” He believes that man was free before the Fall, losing his freedom through sin. Fallen, he does will and act, but in this he walks on a path of alienation and rebellion he cannot leave through his own powers. “This is man’s enslaved will, his *servum arbitrium*.”⁸⁵

Berkouwer understands freedom as neither autonomous nor arbitrary, yet given by God. Man is not free in that sin enslaves, making freedom only understandable in man’s relation to God. Man’s *servum arbitrium* is not impotence in the face of divine omnipotence, but sin, guilt, alienation, and rebellion. Sin is a perversion, not a manifestation of man’s freedom. Divine grace forgives this perversion and “annihilates its effects, and so renders man once again truly free.” Such freedom is free of any competition against Christ on the part of man.⁸⁶ Freedom does not present the believer with a choice between options. The only tension, for Berkouwer, is when man wishes to exercise this freedom against God. He claims that this freedom, “as autonomous self-determination and self-destining,” is “not the ‘essence’ of man, and the supposition that it is or promises to be true freedom” is “completely illusory.”⁸⁷ True freedom is a freedom

⁸⁵*Servum arbitrium*: “arbitrary enslavement.” Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 318-319.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 320-321.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 322.

from rather than a freedom to and is the possession of all believers.⁸⁸ It appears that man has a choice, but in this apparent choice is seen the power of the Holy Spirit at work.⁸⁹

In summary, Berkouwer rejects both synergism and determinism. God cannot be dependent on granting salvation based on the human decision; yet man's decision must be honored. He argues for a tension between man's freedom to choose and his rejection of the offer of salvation. God does not recognize man's decision or the function of man as constituent to his salvation. Scripture honors man's activity, but does not make it part of a synergistic synthesis, for man lost his freedom at the Fall. Moreover, man commits evil by will and not compulsion; yet he was free before the Fall and lost that freedom with the original act of sin. Freedom is not a choice between options, for true freedom is "from" something rather than "to" something.

The Role of Faith

Berkouwer posits that faith and election are not co-ordinate factors resulting in salvation;⁹⁰ yet election becomes decisive only when joined with faith.⁹¹ On this point he concurs with Bavinck.⁹² Faith is for the understanding and knowledge of election through which God is glorified.⁹³ Faith is not a human act complementing God's act of grace.⁹⁴

⁸⁸Ibid., 332, 336.

⁸⁹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 218.

⁹⁰Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 179.

⁹¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 40.

⁹²Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:561.

⁹³Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 179.

⁹⁴Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 45.

Faith is the bond created by God to relate itself to His mercy.⁹⁵ As such, faith is a divine gift.⁹⁶ Its significance in orientation is the grace of God,⁹⁷ totally separating all cooperation between divine salvation and faith. Faith merely rests in the sovereignty of Christ's benefit, admitting Christ to be the Way. There is no room for human merit in anything viewed as a cooperating cause of justification. *Sola fide* and *sola gratia* are synonymous.⁹⁸ Thus having one's name in the Book of Life does not depend on faith and perseverance, "but it is correlated with it."⁹⁹

Faith is not autonomous, working synergistically with divine power. It exists "only because faith is completely directed to the power and blessing of God. Faith is no competitor of *sola gratia*; but sovereign grace is confirmed by faith."¹⁰⁰ It is impossible for faith to be unfruitful.¹⁰¹ He sees a relationship between faith and works for works gives form to faith.¹⁰² Faith is revealed in the reality of life. Directed toward God's mercy¹⁰³ faith cooperates with works, rather than works with it.¹⁰⁴ Faith honors the

⁹⁵Ibid., 178.

⁹⁶Ibid., 190.

⁹⁷Ibid., 29.

⁹⁸Ibid., 42-44.

⁹⁹Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 114.

¹⁰⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 188. Yet faith is necessary in order to accept salvation and to exercise the obedience of faith. Berkouwer rationalizes the tension by stating that obedience is essential to faith illustrating that faith is not autonomous and self-sufficient, capitulating in total surrender. "It is not one modal manifestation of a basic concept called obedience in the same sense as that there are different ways in which we are subject to a certain basic law. Faith is the basic concept which is further described and characterized by the expression *obedience of faith*." Ibid., 195.

¹⁰¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 44.

¹⁰²"A tree is known by its fruits." Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 109.

¹⁰³Ibid., 139.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 136.

sovereignty of grace, never making God's justifying act of grace relative. However, there is a tension, for although he sees faith as a divine gift, Berkouwer calls it a human act. The correlation between faith and justification is not a "divine monologue" in which man is merely a telephone in which God addresses Himself. Once more, the "mystery" is apparent to Berkouwer.

Another dimension to faith is the ministry of the Holy Spirit (grace), judging pride and all that enhances the ego. Faith's companion is repentance.¹⁰⁵

In summary, while on the one hand faith does not impact (not a coordinate factor) on election, faith is active. Though active it rests in God's sovereign work. As such it is free of all human merit. Faith is not dependent on perseverance, but is nevertheless correlated with it. Faith's existence confirms grace. While faith is unaffected by the individual, it cooperates with works. Berkouwer resolves these tensions through perceiving that faith is a mystery of God.

Justification

For Berkouwer, the obedience of Christ crucified, lying in free forgiveness is the alpha and omega of justification. Our disobedience is covered by His obedience, just as His righteousness covers our unrighteousness.¹⁰⁶ Such an understanding of justification is the most important article of faith, the key to all Scripture. The deepest ground of justification is divine grace, received through faith.¹⁰⁷ While for Bavinck, justification is

¹⁰⁵Repentance is tied to justification. Ibid., 178-179.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 45.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 50-52.

an act of divine acquittal,¹⁰⁸ for Berkouwer it is also a divine act of sovereignty independent of human merit that precedes faith.¹⁰⁹ All argument is settled in that Christ is both the electing God and the elected man. Christ's humanness ensures that justification occurs in history.¹¹⁰

In summary, Berkouwer understands that man plays no part in justification, which is a divine act. When weighed against his doctrine of divine election, justification is dependent upon divine determinism.

Sanctification

Berkouwer states that justification and sanctification are bestowed by God. He sees a "relationship in which the grace of God admonishes the progressing believer."¹¹¹ Election is the cause of sanctification,¹¹² which originates in God's mercy,¹¹³ leaving no room for self-pride or self-praise. Humility is the only acceptable response to God's mercy.¹¹⁴ For sanctification to occur, it must give a practical, redemptive touch to the whole of life.¹¹⁵ "Christian activity is certainly not to be excluded . . . [and] must never

¹⁰⁸Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:527.

¹⁰⁹Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 145.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 163.

¹¹¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 108.

¹¹²Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 142.

¹¹³Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 26.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 117, 124-125.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 12-13.

be severed from its relation to the mercy of God.”¹¹⁶ The elect are involved in a process of recovery. While an inclination to evil remains, a transition toward righteousness exists. Believers must become increasingly “earnest in seeking remission of sins and righteousness of Christ.”¹¹⁷

Berkouwer sees a dilemma between tangible holiness and having Christ as man’s sole sanctity.¹¹⁸ For him the issue of sanctification is the nature of this new beginning.¹¹⁹ Personal sanctity must exist. While God’s call to holiness is a fact, it is never an independent human function, but a divine act.¹²⁰

Sanctification is rooted in an action in which God permanently separated Israel through divine election.¹²¹ The relationship between God’s sanctifying and man’s sanctity is neither competition nor cooperation. “Behind this separation lies his gracious election, his love, his oath,” which he calls “harmonious correlation.” The relationship between justification and sanctification is best understood in his view that Israel’s role is to “give expression to the unique relationship established by God.”¹²²

Imitation of Christ

For Berkouwer, the imitation of Christ envelops the entire life and is the essence

¹¹⁶Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 77.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 78.

¹²⁰Ibid., 18-21.

¹²¹Ibid., 23.

¹²²Ibid., 24-25.

of sanctification. This imitation is the essence of sanctification,¹²³ involving total surrender. It is all-inclusive, overriding all other loyalties, and consists of remaining in Christ. The total will of the elect must be rehabilitated in Christ.¹²⁴ Such imitation is founded in the atonement, making it impossible to celebrate love at the expense of justice¹²⁵ and does not come into conflict with obedience (and the law).¹²⁶ Imitation participates with Christ in His mercies. Failure in this regard is an extreme denial of God's grace.¹²⁷

Obedience and the Law

Berkouwer supports obedience to the law, which he sees as a conformity by which man offers himself to God's command: "This does not mean that the inclination is more important than the deed, but rather that in the deed of obedience the giving of one's self is demanded." The commandments of God are not inert, or which one can impersonally fulfill or not. The law calls for a total, personal relationship. It is the giving over of the heart, and "therein of the whole man, to obedience." Moreover, obedience "is always a response to the divine demand." It excludes "every merely legalistic understanding of the law."¹²⁸

¹²³Ibid., 135.

¹²⁴Ibid., 139.

¹²⁵Ibid., 159-160.

¹²⁶Ibid., 144 (see: pp. 172-193).

¹²⁷Ibid., 146-150.

¹²⁸Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 177-178.

Perfection

The eminent theologian Hans La Rondelle wrote his Th.D. dissertation on G. C. Berkouwer's theology of perfection and perfectionism.¹²⁹ This is noteworthy in that Berkouwer was La Rondelle's academic advisor. Following is a brief summary of Berkouwer's understanding of perfectionism. Berkouwer understands perfectionism as a "premature seizure of the glory that will be: an anticipation leading irrevocably to nomism."¹³⁰ Holiness is not a second blessing coming in the train of justification.¹³¹ He is uncomfortable with what he sees as perfectionism's "illicit relationship" with nomism and synergism.¹³² For him, perfection is God's gift rather than ethical conduct.¹³³ Christ was crucified so that we can be holy.¹³⁴ Holiness must envelop life until Christ's return. There is no causal connection between a partial working of the Holy Spirit and our imperfection. Sanctification progresses "in weakness, temptation, and exposure to the powers of darkness."¹³⁵ The "warfare of faith is the warfare of 'abiding' in Christ's love (John 15:9-10) and 'abiding' in his word (1 John 2:14). Only in that battle is there

¹²⁹H. K. La Rondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-Ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfectionism* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1975).

¹³⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 67. By nomism is meant the "belief that, having been accepted by God on the basis of his saving grace, his people are obliged to obey the Mosaic law. This was certainly the case in Israel before the coming of Christ, and it is therefore right to think of OT religion (and probably first century Judaism as well) as nomistic. It is also true to say that the Jerusalem church was nomistic." C. G. Kruse, "Law," *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 539.

¹³¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 64.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 53.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 49.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 64.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 64-66.

protection” against the evil one (Eph 6:16; cf. 2 Thess 3:3).¹³⁶

Berkouwer compares progress toward perfection to a vine’s branches, which if broken off, cannot bear fruit. Abiding in Christ results in bearing fruit. As such, it is a call to action that is not self-impelled. The “believer must flee from sin (1 Tim 6:11), and not strive (2 Tim 2:24). One should build on faith, pray in the Spirit, keep in the love of God, and look for the mercy of Jesus Christ’ (Jude 20, 21).” In this way one “may grow unto salvation.” Opposing this progress are deceit, pretense, jealousy, and slander.¹³⁷ He claims that abiding in Christ is decisive to progress in sanctification.¹³⁸ He disconnects moralism and righteousness by works from perfection due to his view that growing in sanctification never included an element of working under one’s own auspices. Rather, it meant working out one’s own salvation with a “rising sense of dependence on God’s grace.”¹³⁹

Perseverance

Berkouwer addresses perseverance in the context of the elect, tying it directly to faith, justification, and sanctification. It is the “abidingness” of salvation and cannot be reversed or undone.¹⁴⁰ Perseverance is *God’s* preservation;¹⁴¹ it “has to be a relation whose being must be renewed every moment to remain true.”¹⁴² This faith continuance is

¹³⁶Berkouwer, *Sin*, 127.

¹³⁷Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 107-108.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 109-110.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 9-10.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, 13.

due to the “assurance of God’s grace, with the power of Him who prays for us, and of the Holy Ghost, who seals us unto the day of salvation.”¹⁴³

God’s faithfulness does not depend on man’s faithfulness, but on the act of divine acquittal; nothing but “the continuity of forgiveness and reconciliation” is needed.¹⁴⁴ For Berkouwer any resistance from the elect is never total or final (2 Cor 10:5).¹⁴⁵

The mystery of faith must mean that man looks away from himself and then perseveres toward God with Whom he then walks. Berkouwer claims that final perseverance is a goal set before believers, and is promised to all who persevere in good works. He acknowledges Scripture’s repeated use of the word *if* in instruction to believers, claiming that this is merely to portray a tension. He admits that conditional language permeates Scripture, and that the cares of life lead one away from fellowship with Christ.¹⁴⁶ Therefore continual diligence is needed for a full assurance of our hope.

In spite of Berkouwer’s assertion that election is irreversible, and that resistance is never total or final, he claims that Hebrews warns against apostasy as a real threat. There is also a reminder of the fall of those who hardened their hearts in the desert (Heb 3:12), as well as “against becoming hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13).”¹⁴⁷

Berkouwer notes there is in Scripture an admonition to keep from radical apostasy, estrangement, slothfulness, unbelief, and obduracy: “Quench not the Spirit”

¹⁴³Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 222-223.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 43-45.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 84-85.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 86-87.

(1 Thess 5:19) and, “If we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim 2:12).¹⁴⁸

Nevertheless, Berkouwer quotes 2 Pet 2:20, 21; 1 Tim 4:1; Heb 6:4; 10:26, to establish that there is powerful evidence in Scripture to declare there is a total falling away resulting in a total rejection by God, and all this would indicate that man has a choice regarding his salvation. He also recognizes this goes to the heart of questions relating to perseverance. He then answers his dilemma by stating, “If anything is certain, it is this; that according to the Scriptures God’s grace does not stop short at the limits of human freedom of choice.”¹⁴⁹ Any dilemma one might have between these two opposing tensions is addressed by an acceptance that the perseverance of the saints can be regarded as a “mystery.” The reason for the mystery is that “we cannot demonstrate this constancy as an irrefutable certainty, either in the lives of others or in our own lives.”¹⁵⁰

In summary, Berkouwer understands sanctification to be the result of election, yet accompanied by human activity. There is a process toward righteousness, though personal sanctity is a divine act. He argues that the imitation of Christ, which rests on atonement, is the essence of sanctification. Such imitation participates with Christ and results in the bearing of fruit. However, he rejects any form of nomism and synergism as illicit. Perseverance of the elect is God’s preservation and comes independent of man’s faithfulness; yet human diligence is necessary. Any tension between man’s relationship and God’s act in perseverance is resolved by the process being a mystery of God.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 87.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 88-90.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 237.

Role of the Holy Spirit

John Calvin espouses that the Holy Spirit directs His ministry to the Elect,¹⁵¹ and Kuyper argues that the Holy Spirit provides grace selectively,¹⁵² while Bavinck claims that the Holy Spirit operates in the lives of the elect.¹⁵³ Berkouwer does not dispute this, adding that the Spirit (origin of faith) penetrates the human heart with the promise of salvation.¹⁵⁴ Man resists until conquered by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁵ The Holy Spirit draws by His superiority. While not all human activity is ruled out, not a trace of synergism exists, placing man within the “freedom of God.”¹⁵⁶ Cooperation with the Holy Spirit occurs only if the “‘we’ magnifies the grace of God or whether the grace of God is understood as a pedestal on which to elevate the ‘we.’”¹⁵⁷ This creates a tension with his view that God is concerned with man’s act and the fulfillment of His law. While he posits that man’s activity must come from the heart, the act cannot be ignored. The elect must have the disposition or mind which was “also in Christ Jesus” and states that man’s calling is not merely an attitude, but is a calling to activity, surrender, humiliation, and obedience (Phil 2:5-8).¹⁵⁸ He posits that the Holy Spirit breaks us down in order to build us up. Christ is the example, living in *concrete reality* and within the *totality of life*.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵¹Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, 3:250.

¹⁵²Kuyper, *Particular Grace*, 69.

¹⁵³Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:594.

¹⁵⁴Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 28-30.

¹⁵⁵Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 40.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁵⁷Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 121.

¹⁵⁸Berkouwer, *Sin*, 320.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 228-229.

This is evidence to Berkouwer that the Holy Spirit orchestrates change, softening the hardened heart and turning disobedience into obedience, resulting in the tree bringing forth the fruits of good actions.¹⁶⁰ He stresses that God does not merely illuminate the mind of the elect, but powerfully changes hearts and wills.¹⁶¹ This “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit in the human heart is a “mystery,”¹⁶² in that it is a supernatural work, and not analyzable. This mystery of the Spirit neither detracts from the dynamic of the gospel nor does it foster an “ecstatic mysticism” or an “eager passivism.”¹⁶³

The ministry of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from either the spoken or written Word:¹⁶⁴ “Though the acceptance of the Word would seem to be a matter of our own choice and activity, yet *in that choice* the power of the *Spirit* is at work.”¹⁶⁵ Anything else is spiritualism. Berkouwer provides added weight to this by stating it is through the Word that one becomes aware of sin and judgment, and there is no indication within Scripture that the Holy Spirit works *sine verbo* (without words).¹⁶⁶

Man’s sinfulness is exposed by unbelief in Jesus. The Holy Spirit’s convicting reveals man’s sin. Guilt is man’s indictment: “Here, then, is the sin in all sin, not in a general moral sense or in the sense of a formal transgression of the law, but rather in the sense of the lawless reality of sin which is both defined and made known in this relation

¹⁶⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 79.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 212-213.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 219-222.

to Jesus. . . . Therefore the man who repudiates the Christ in unbelief is judged by the Word of Christ (John 12:48).”¹⁶⁷ Berkouwer connected the Holy Spirit to the doctrine of the radical corruption of human nature, which would preclude a living faith.¹⁶⁸ He also holds there is a limit to the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, which is obvious in Heb 6:4 in that the text indicates the impossibility of renewal after falling away.¹⁶⁹

In summary, Berkouwer argues the Holy Spirit is effectual by His superiority. Change comes without human activity and synergism; though cooperation does exist when God’s grace is magnified, for the elect have a disposition (illumination) of the mind which changes hearts and wills. The mechanics of the Spirit’s activity are a mystery. All activity of the Holy Spirit must be synchronized with the Word of God, otherwise it is spiritualism. Finally, the purpose of conviction is the revealing of human sin.

Judgment and Reward

Berkouwer believes that works determine the sentence. A biblical preponderance of rewards for action exists.¹⁷⁰ Reward suggests a legitimate and praiseworthy motivation. He agrees with Barth that “faith works for this reward.” He clarifies by stating that “religion is not a sop to our egoism and a cloak for avariciousness. There is a scriptural way between a eudemonistic ethic and a formal, categorical ethic of sheer duty.”¹⁷¹ Rewards “have no function which can be isolated from God’s mercy,” for they

¹⁶⁷Berkouwer, *Sin*, 224-225.

¹⁶⁸Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 83-84.

¹⁶⁹Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 193.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 114-116.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, 118-119.

are “sealed within this divine clemency.” God’s mercy “leads His children in safe conduct along the way of salvation.” To lose sight of divine mercy results in legalism and work-righteousness. Therefore rewards do not correlate with divine mercy.¹⁷²

Berkouwer deals with the tension between his doctrine of *sola fide* and the biblical promises of rewards for choice and action in several ways. First, all rewards flow from the merits of Christ crucified. Second, he insists that “on the one hand the correspondence between work and reward may be maintained, while on the other that every merit that could accrue to good works be denied.” This is the only way he can understand this “scriptural teaching in its wholeness.”¹⁷³ He rejects the view that reward is a “contractual answer to an earned claim” for we are “unprofitable servants.”¹⁷⁴ Man must face God’s judgment on the basis of his inhumanity rather than his humanness.¹⁷⁵

In summary, Berkouwer holds that while works determine one’s sentence, God’s mercy provides “safe conduct.” Works independent of divine mercy is legalism for there can be no human merit. Judgment is directly connected to one’s humanity or lack of it.

As we transition from Berkouwer’s theological presuppositions that impact his understanding of the unpardonable sin, and prepare to address his concept of the sin against the Holy Spirit itself, we need to take a look at his understanding of the doctrine of sin per se. Berkouwer’s work on this topic remains as one of the most recognized treatises in print today.

¹⁷²Ibid., 127-128.

¹⁷³Ibid., 121-122.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 123-125.

¹⁷⁵Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 65.

Sin

Berkouwer points out that in all biblical definitions of sin there is a persistent stress on the seriousness of rebellion and transgression in that they lead away from God. Sin's total and radical character, consequences, and divine judgment are always evident.¹⁷⁶ For him, sin and destruction are not willed by God in the same sense that grace and salvation are,¹⁷⁷ and though not a good in itself; it is indirectly, "because it is subjected and conquered, and reveals God's majesty, power and justice."¹⁷⁸

Berkouwer looks at sin in the singular and as an all-inclusive unbelief. While he does not reject a variety of sins, all sins are aberrations from God and are "one decisive act of *unbelief* or *disobedience* to Jesus."¹⁷⁹ The depths of sin are "measured in terms of the law alone."¹⁸⁰ It is therefore insubordination to "that very law to which God (as Law-giver) is not subject."¹⁸¹ Sin is not a "tragic lot which eliminates responsibility; it is not a pernicious plague which befalls a man apart from his own will."¹⁸²

Origin of Sin

Berkouwer argues that fatalism is an attempt to explain away sin, or at the least to avoid personal responsibility for it, for sin cannot be metaphysically explained.¹⁸³ He

¹⁷⁶Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 142.

¹⁷⁷Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 178.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁷⁹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 223.

¹⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 147.

rejects sin as a fatal or transcendent power. He believes that man's subjection is the result of being willfully conquered, for the "sinner is not a victim in his powerless passivity but is actively engaged." He adds: "Scripture leaves us no room to posit the origin of sin in a fatalistic or tragical intrigue,"¹⁸⁴ because man is not a helpless victim, and sin is "rather the consequence of man's own fallen heart."¹⁸⁵ Thus he rejects a scriptural connection of sin's origin to a causal connection to Satan. His concern is using demonic influence as an alibi, rather than a belief that demonic temptation is non-existent.¹⁸⁶

For Berkouwer, sin is an illicit incursion into the universe and thus illegitimate. Any explanation of its origin is unwarranted and irrational. Sin is a different reality, having no origin, merely a beginning.¹⁸⁷ His views are in line with those of Herman Bavinck who understands sin to be a "privation or corruption of the moral perfection" of man, and a deformity with no right to exist; in essence a mystery.¹⁸⁸ Berkouwer states that "Scripture makes no effort at all to explain the origin of sin in terms of its component parts. There is no allusion to an impenetrable darkness or an unfortunate gap in our knowledge. There is only the *confession of our guilt*." Sin's origin has a qualitatively different character from any other origin. He states that "we are concerned with a different 'causality' from the causality that is usually meant in the question of sin's origin."¹⁸⁹ He states that a "remarkable relation exists between seeking for the origin of

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 100.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 110-111.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 101.

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

¹⁸⁸Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:126-127.

¹⁸⁹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 101.

sin and an *exculpation or exoneration of one's own person*. Whoever reflects on the origin of sin . . . is engaged, intimately and personally, in what can only be called the *problem of sin's guilt*. Any 'causal' explanation we propose can only be seen, in the practice of living, as a means of fashioning an 'indisputable' excuse." One can never assign the reality of sin to the goodness of God's creation.¹⁹⁰ Berkouwer claims that Scripture witnesses to *Deus non est causa, auctor peccati* (God is not the cause or author of sin). The basis for this is that "a decision has already been made of far-reaching and even normative significance." For him, any connection between the decrees of God and the cause of man's sin is coincidental.¹⁹¹ To then argue that God has anything to do with man's sin is to provide sin with a "definitive and final excuse."¹⁹²

Berkouwer believes one must "exclude all self-excuse or self-evidentness, all causality or transparency. This is the process from the original goodness of creation to the later senselessness of sin." For this reason he identifies sin as the "independent or original 'antipode' of good." Thus any search for the nature of sin is an attempt to bring sense to the senseless, reason to the irrational, and legitimacy to that which is illegitimate.¹⁹³ Yet, it must be understood that any process is a process of God, rather than a process involving man, for "we see God's power in every process of the history of salvation."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 14.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 48.

¹⁹²Ibid., 27.

¹⁹³Ibid., 25.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 48.

For Berkouwer, no matter how sin may work its way into the human experience, it can never be part of reality, for its purpose is the disruption and destruction of reality. To really understand sin's origin, it is vital to understand its nature and essence.¹⁹⁵

In summary, Berkouwer states that sin is an aberration from God. Sin is not willed by God in the same sense as grace and salvation; yet sin is an indirect good; yet any connection between sin and divine decree is coincidental. The process of sin is a process of God rather than that of man. Moreover, man is not a helpless victim for he is willfully conquered by sin and there is no causal connection to Satan. Sin is an illicit incursion and different reality. It can only be understood in the practice of living.

Nature of Sin

Sin engages humans in a deadly peril; a mortal enemy whose nature must be understood to be overcome. To minimize sin lures one to sleep.¹⁹⁶ Berkouwer understands sin to be existential. It is always against God, though often practiced against man. This reality does not minimize its seriousness. He claims that the "relation between a sinning against the 'first' and a sinning against the 'second' table of the law to be intimate." When we offend a neighbor we injure God. The two tables of the law cannot be separated, love for God and for one's neighbor. "Only a blatant illusion could hold these two 'spheres' apart. Never is a sin against our fellowman any less serious than a sin against God."¹⁹⁷ By its very nature, sin is a violation of the commandment to love.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 63.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 235-236.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., 242-244.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 249.

Individual sin is also viewed as corporate sin due to the close relationship between an individual and his community. This is evident in the sin of Achan.¹⁹⁹

He claims that we do not know from where sin comes or what it is. Though present, it has no right to exist. Though without motive, it is the motive for all human thinking and action,²⁰⁰ and cannot be “explained in terms of its component factors.”²⁰¹ Evil “can only claim its own peculiar ‘principle’ for its own particular existence.” It can only be explained if understood as an exculpation from evil.²⁰² The very tendency to excuse or explain it is part of its nature.²⁰³ However, Berkouwer does not mean to imply that sin is any less powerful, real, or influential on human reality. For him, sin’s riddle is its senselessness and “motivelessness.” Therefore it is futile to find sense or meaning in that which is both senseless and meaningless,²⁰⁴ other than to regard it as an “aberration which causes us to miss the goal of a living communion with God,” and leads to passions which produce fruit unto death.²⁰⁵

In addressing the progression into demonic possession, Berkouwer speaks of guilt and its role in man’s capitulation to Satan. The power of the evil one becomes irresistible. This is not fate. On this path an individual “is more and more the ‘object’ of seduction and temptation; and in that same frame of reference we understand the expressions of a

¹⁹⁹S. Lewis Johnsson, Jr., “G. C. Berkouwer and the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 528 (October 1975): 316-327.

²⁰⁰Berkouwer, *Sin*, 63-64.

²⁰¹*Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰²Berkouwer interchanges the terms *evil* and *sin*. *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁰³*Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰⁴Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 142.

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 144.

brute ‘power’ in which an ‘objectified’ man is miserably ‘ensnared.’” In this way “we see the powerlessness, captivity, and ‘objectification’ of man.” This is the meaning of being possessed. As such, this “ruthless power” and “inexorable force” becomes humanly irresistible. A sinful, bound and weakened person cannot resist. Resistance can come only from “another power that seizes a man and reverses the course of his living.”²⁰⁶

A consequence of sin is that it blinds men’s eyes to its true nature. Berkouwer sees this resulting in an inability to correctly perceive someone else’s life, which “is the natural product of his self-alienation from God.”²⁰⁷ As such, sin “discloses its true essence by *hiding its deepest intents*.” It is in this “metamorphosis of evil that we see the power of seduction.” For it “has no thesis in itself but only antithesis.”²⁰⁸ It takes evil and presents it as good, and then takes good and holds it up as evil.²⁰⁹ There is a progression or increase in sin as directly connected to a misuse of God’s law and a desire for self-justification.²¹⁰

Seduction

Berkouwer uses the term seduction as a means to describe the nature of sin. He calls it both the form and the power of human sin. As such it is lawlessness (*anomia*), which makes use of the law, yet by the law it unleashes its “deadening power.”²¹¹

²⁰⁶Berkouwer, *Sin*, 112-113.

²⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 151-154.

²⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 238.

²⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 237.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, 179.

²¹¹*Ibid.*, 239.

Privatio

Berkouwer also calls sin a *contra voluntatem* (against the will), never a *praeter voluntatem Dei* (against the will of God).²¹² Sin's demonic effrontery is its use of the fullness of human life for its malevolency. While being uncreaturely, it positions itself in the center of the human heart. As such it is not a peripheral phenomenon. Though an alien force, it is completely pervasive.²¹³

He refers to Bavinck who propounds privation as a definition of sin,²¹⁴ rejecting that sin has any substance or part in creaturely reality, though manifest in reality. For Bavinck, sin is a hiatus, a "not yet," or as he would put it, a "*nihil*."²¹⁵ He expands: "The reality and the fullness of God are stamped on every description of every 'definition' of our sin. That fact is clear enough when we see the many negative terms for sin: *disobedience, unfaithfulness, disbelief, lawlessness* and *lovelessness*. These expressions imply that sin is something that is lacking, but they also point to the disconcerting and catastrophic character of sin."²¹⁶ In other words, this *nihil* of sin is not suggestive of "an idealistic category but something profoundly 'real.' Sin is *privation actuosa* (energetic privation)."²¹⁷ Sin is a parasite on reality and is non-material. It is a deformation, a non-being;²¹⁸ yet "it is impossible to conceive of sin in abstraction and apart from the fullness

²¹²Ibid., 148.

²¹³Ibid., 265.

²¹⁴Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:126, 136-138, 140-141, 145, 151-152.

²¹⁵Berkouwer, *Sin*, 63-64.

²¹⁶Ibid., 256.

²¹⁷Ibid., 264.

²¹⁸Ibid., 261-262.

of reality.”²¹⁹ It cannot be understood in any other way. It seeks to rule and to ruin.²²⁰

Berkouwer believes *privation* to be an inadequate description of sin’s essence, unless the definition includes its *contra*-character.²²¹ He sees privation as coming in where life and glory once were. This describes the sinful human life-direction, which involves a falling away²²² evident in Gen 3. Eve was offered a greater light and ended up losing the light that she had.²²³ He concludes that because Christian theologians regard sin a privation, there can be no causal relation to God.²²⁴

In summary, Berkouwer sees sin as always being against God, though often directed against man. Sin is a violation of the commandment to love. It is senseless and without motive and leads to an irresistibility unless God enables resistance. Sin seduces the individual and makes him believe that he has been deprived. Sin works as a parasite on reality; seeking to rule and to ruin. It presents itself as good and presents good as evil. The progression of sin is fueled by the human desire for self-justification.

Categories of Sin

Berkouwer argues for categories and degrees of sin. Most apparent is the distinction between sins which shall be forgiven and the sin against the Holy Spirit. Sin’s magnitude is therefore relevant. Generalizing and universalizing sin must not detract

²¹⁹Ibid., 264.

²²⁰Ibid., 261-262.

²²¹Ibid., 265.

²²²Ibid., 268.

²²³Ibid., 269-275.

²²⁴Ibid., 65.

from this. He sees gradations of sin “within the arena of God’s *universal and serious complaint*.” Such sins as brotherly anger and insult are balanced by the accompanying judgments. However, in “every instance, in the face of a superficial view of sin, he points to the real depth of man’s guilt. Only in that perspective can we rightly see the gradations in man’s sin.”²²⁵ For this reason he believes it is impossible to regard human sin as an “objective or universal phenomenon in abstraction from the situation in which it is committed.” The reality for Berkouwer is that this “has a profound impact on the gravity of judgment.” It is within this recognition that gradation is rightly understood.²²⁶

There is no distinction between venial and mortal sin in Berkouwer’s theology. In the Catholic distinctions, venial sins do not endanger access to God’s grace, while mortal sins do. For him, all sin needs to be confessed and pardoned, otherwise God’s grace will be lost. He also rejects the argument that venial sins cannot lead to mortal sins. He holds that all unresolved sin will result in the loss of God’s grace. For, “every sin is rebellion and deserving of the penalty of death.”²²⁷

At the heart of his rejection of differentiating between venial and mortal sins are his views regarding the gradation of sin. Berkouwer states that the controversy “does not concern the concept of *gradation* at all. It does not concern the recognition of various phases of man’s sin, as the deterioration of evil, the hardening of man’s heart and the callousness of his activity.” This whole controversy centers in the biblical keywords of *grace* and *pardon*. A neat “compartmentalizing” of our sin, implied in the “Roman

²²⁵Ibid., 285-286.

²²⁶Ibid., 287.

²²⁷Berkouwer, *Sin*, 303-306.

distinction, is rendered impossible in Jesus' criticism of the pharisaical casuistry."²²⁸

Berkouwer believes that a failure to hear or listen to God is as integral to sin as is rebellion, and thus transgression.²²⁹ Though he includes not-having and not-doing as part of the nature of sin, he does not believe that all not-having and not-doing are sin.²³⁰

In summary, Berkouwer does not distinguish between venial and mortal sins, for all unconfessed and unresolved sin ultimately results in the loss of divine grace. He rather understands the differences in sin being directly connected to the depth of man's guilt; which in turn impacts the gravity of divine judgment. Failure to listen to God is as integral to sin as rebellion.

Gradation and Fullness of Sin

Berkouwer does not see a "pellucid picture of the inner processes of man's sin," or a psychology of evil in Scripture. He sees merely a certain ripening, a becoming full, an increase in human obduracy until sin's fullness leads to death. It is in this sense that he recognizes a biblical reference to the hardness of heart. This gradation is a process in evil, which is the result of an ongoing intensification of divine revelation. The result of this revelation is that sin is made more and more manifest.²³¹ He connects this process, increase in sin and hardness of heart, with a misuse of God's law and the desire at self-justification.²³² Yet he does not link this process to the sin against the Holy Spirit.

²²⁸Ibid., 311.

²²⁹Ibid., 267.

²³⁰Ibid., 263.

²³¹Ibid., 292-293.

²³²Ibid., 179-180.

Resolving Sin

Berkouwer sees the resolution to sin being found in justification and the Cross's centrality.²³³ This must be followed by sanctification and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. In the Cross one is able to observe sin as a *horribilis destruction* which cannot be part of any cohesive whole. It "can only be excluded, covered, forgiven, and blotted out," for God is "radically opposed to sin's inanity and radical senselessness." The Cross fully exposes this senselessness.²³⁴ Pardon is obtained only on the mercy of the Pardoner.²³⁵ Forgiveness does not eradicate the irreparable character of sin and its temporal consequences. Sin's influence remains. Recognition of this is the heart of true confession.²³⁶

Berkouwer emphasizes that where love is lacking, sin is boundless. "Therefore when the grace of Christ reveals the true meaning of our lives in a love for God and our neighbors, the riddle of sin is not resolved but is *only known and confessed*. Sin is more and more acknowledged as lawlessness as we grow in love for the commandments of God which are holy and right and good."²³⁷ The only way that this change is possible is through dependency and childlike faith in God and His command.²³⁸

"True knowledge of sin is concretized in a true confession of our guilt. *In* the act

²³³In that he recognizes the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), Berkouwer holds the only possible means of escape for the sinner is divine mercy and pardon, which is done through God's initiative, His atonement. This must be understood as the exclusive work of God. Ibid., 241, 49.

²³⁴Ibid., 49.

²³⁵Ibid., 306-307.

²³⁶Ibid., 315.

²³⁷Ibid., 146.

²³⁸Ibid., 154-155.

of confession the way is opened up for a man to live for others and not for himself.

Within the act of pardon we are brought back again to the ‘new commandment of God.’”

As such, the law and gospel have everything to do with each other. Berkouwer argues that for sin to be removed, it must be fully confessed.²³⁹ “Thus a reference to man’s humanness can never be ground for self-excusing, but is rather an evidence of guilt: guilt, even when man lives within the relations of common humanity. Man sins in the midst of these environments, with his norms, with his morality.”²⁴⁰ He goes on to state that the “essential hallmark of true confession is this rejection of an explanation for our sin in terms of its component factors.”²⁴¹ Such confession cannot explain or systemize sin, but must include a recognition that one’s sin is without cause.²⁴²

Berkouwer sees an ongoing tension between the life lived in the flesh and that lived in the Spirit (Gal 5:17). For him, each is a radically different life direction. He propounds: “In the contrast of the ‘works of the flesh’ and the ‘fruits of the Spirit’ we find first one and then another manifestation of life, each of which exemplifies man’s alienation from God or estrangement from the world. The ‘concretizing’ of sin is pictured in variety and is only an illustration of the sin in every Christian’s living. In this situation the fruits of the Spirit and the works of the flesh underscore the structure or direction of a Christian’s living in his world. Therefore the catalogues of virtues and vices are only a manifestation of two different ‘walks’ in two different ‘ways.’”²⁴³

²³⁹Ibid., 229-230.

²⁴⁰Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 190.

²⁴¹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 19.

²⁴²Ibid., 141-142.

²⁴³Ibid., 300-301.

In summary, Berkouwer holds the only resolution for sin is justification. Pardon can be obtained only through God's mercy. Man must acknowledge his guilt and sin must be fully confessed. Finally, the direction of a person's life is manifest in either the presence of the fruit of the Spirit or of the works of the flesh.

Having provided a survey of Berkouwer's theological presuppositions that impact his understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit, we must now examine his perspective of the sin itself.

The Unpardonable Sin

Berkouwer broaches the unpardonable sin by asking questions such as whether it is a specific sin; whether a once-off violation damns the perpetrator forever; whether an individual can ever reach a point beyond which the sin cannot be forgiven; and how the unpardonable sin fits with 1 John 1:7, which claims that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. He believes the unpardonable sin will always remain in a veil of "mystery."²⁴⁴

Several issues are resolved quite simply for Berkouwer. First, regenerated believers cannot commit the sin against the Holy Spirit.²⁴⁵ This position stands at some contrast to that of Calvin, who understands sin to be the result of rebellion after the power

²⁴⁴Ibid., 323, 325. In answer to his first question, Berkouwer is emphatic: "Total falling, therefore, has to be rejected time and time again. This objection had a very definite origin. It did not originate in an under-estimation of the believer's sins, as if these sins were so insignificant that they would not disrupt the believer's life," but "was the insight into God's eternal love, of that love which precluded ours, of an election which did not depend on our morality and our faith but which preceded every attitude or response of man. For this reason, faith always spoke of the constancy in the life of the believer in terms of the power of God's grace." Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 233.

²⁴⁵Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 41.

of God has been revealed.²⁴⁶ However, neither Calvin nor Berkouwer (in this specific context) connect the revelation of God's power to the salvific ministry of the Holy Spirit. Second, the unpardonable sin is the result of our sinning.²⁴⁷ Third, the unpardonable sin is not linked to the third commandment.²⁴⁸

Definitions

Berkouwer identifies the common view of the unpardonable sin as having to do “with a conscious and radical renunciation of the Holy Spirit and his work.” He sees this as being tied to sinning against one's better judgment and a brute denial of the kingdom of God, and present in all sins. This leads him to question the nature of this blasphemy. He rejects any connection of this sin to a hardness of heart, in that he sees instances of such hardness in many being removed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.²⁴⁹

He warns against apostasy by those once enlightened by knowledge of the truth, in that it reviles the Spirit of grace, despises Christ, thus crucifying Him afresh. While Berkouwer rejects the view that it is a particular sin or has a reference to one of the Ten Commandments, and that it cannot be localized and identified as “the great sin,” it takes shape in its radical, total, blatant, and willful apostasy, for “it is exactly the *Christian's* living that is threatened by apostasy.”²⁵⁰ Berkouwer is here in full agreement with

²⁴⁶Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 32:74.

²⁴⁷Berkouwer, *Sin*, 149.

²⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 324.

²⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 331-332.

²⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 343-344.

Calvin.²⁵¹ There is a deliberateness to the unpardonable sin.²⁵² Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck agree that the sin against the Holy Spirit occurs after a certain degree of spiritual enlightenment.²⁵³ However, in the context of Reformed theology, this should not be understood that such enlightenment holds any redemptive qualities.

He posits a disparity between sin against Christ and sin against the Holy Spirit.²⁵⁴ Berkouwer states that prior to the cross Christ deliberately concealed His full identity, whereas this was not so with the identity of the Holy Spirit. This is the only reason for there being a temporary distinction between blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and blasphemy against Christ. The Savior's warning is one against a conscious disputing of the indisputable. It is also an admonition not to credit Beelzebul with the works of God.²⁵⁵

This solves Berkouwer's dilemma of the Gospel and Hebrews texts in that Hebrews points to deliberate sinning as a conscious rejection of what has transpired and is self-evident since the crucifixion. The outraging of Christ is now flagrant and purposeful. He is crucified anew, and His blood deliberately despised. The distinction between the Christological and pneumatological thus falls away, and blasphemy against one is now against both. All now concentrates on resistance or antipathy by which evil men respond to Christ's decisive act. Since the resurrection of Christ and the gospel's

²⁵¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.21.

²⁵²Berkouwer, *Sin*, 334.

²⁵³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.322; Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 611; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:156.

²⁵⁴Berkouwer, *Sin*, 330.

²⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 340-341.

proclamation at Pentecost, the differentiation has fallen away. “Sin was now qualified for all time as the renunciation of salvation in Christ and the light which shines in darkness (1 John 2:8). Therefore the whole counsel of God must now be proclaimed (cf. Acts 20:27; 1 Cor 2:2), and men must be adjured to come to faith and repentance. From this time forth (as we read in Hebrews) any despising of Christ’s blood is the very same thing as a blaspheming of the Spirit of *grace*.”²⁵⁶

Mark speaks of sins and blasphemies,²⁵⁷ and Berkouwer claims that blasphemies occur when special stress is laid on the motive of blatant and insolent, wanton and deliberate sin. Conscious insolence thus becomes the *trait d’union* between Hebrews and the Gospel accounts, and that this wantonness is well qualified goes unrecognized.²⁵⁸

Berkouwer links all forgiven sins to Christ within the context of Matt 12:31-32. He believes the entire disjunction of 12:31 is defined by the specific relation between this sin and the Spirit. Speaking against the Holy Spirit is contrasted to speaking against Christ, producing another distinction within “the *single concept of sin*, which can only be a sin against *God*. Apparently within that single arena of sin there are important nuances

²⁵⁶Ibid., 341.

²⁵⁷Ibid., 330.

²⁵⁸Ibid., 336. Both the Christological and pneumatological sins now qualify as the sin against the Holy Spirit. Despising Christ is now equivalent to outraging the Spirit of grace. Berkouwer states that the Holy Spirit is maligned when Christ is despised. He concurs with O. Michel who regards this as an outright flaunting of God’s judgment. On this point Berkouwer concludes that what “Hebrews emphasizes is this *falling away* of the distinction between the Christological and pneumatological aspects, even though that distinction is very real in the Gospels. In Hebrews the *exclusiveness of the pneumatological* is no longer apparent.” Ibid., 335-336.

Citing Heinrich Heppe, Berkouwer provides another clue to his understanding of the unpardonable sin. It is a falling away in conscious rebellion against God’s kingdom of grace, rather than a failure to act against one’s conscience, or persecuting the Church of Christ. It is the willfulness of the act which manifests the *mysterium iniquitatis*. As such it becomes evident as both Christological and pneumatological. Ibid., 342.

and even a contrast. Thus, the Gospel of Luke makes very plain that ‘speaking a word against the Son’ is set in contrast to blaspheming the Spirit (Luke 12:10).”²⁵⁹

Berkouwer also sees the unpardonable sin as “an obvious perversion and denial of the facts: *this antipathy* against the acts of Christ by means of the Spirit and the finger of God (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20).” In Mark he sees a single motive in the charge that Beelzebul is the source of Jesus’ power, while in Matthew it is more complicated in that Matthew draws relations between the Kingdom, Jesus, and the Spirit.²⁶⁰

In summary, Berkouwer claims the unpardonable sin to be based on a conscious and radical renunciation of the Holy Spirit and His work. It is not necessarily a hardness of heart; nor is it a particular sin. Furthermore, it takes shape in a radical, total, blatant, and deliberate apostasy. Since Christ unmasked His divinity after the resurrection, and seeing that the New Testament makes no distinction between the ministries of the Holy Spirit and of Christ, temporary distinctions relating to the unpardonable sin are removed. Therefore, any despising of Christ’s blood is identical to blaspheming the Spirit of grace.

Biographical Examples

Pharaoh

Berkouwer observes the following in regard to God’s dealings with Pharaoh. First, God raised him up for the specific purpose of showing His power and glorifying His name in all the earth (Rom 9:17). Second, Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod 8:15). Berkouwer does not wish to dismiss Pharaoh’s free, voluntary activity or recognize him as independent of God, for he sees Pharaoh as being in God’s hand. He holds that

²⁵⁹Ibid., 327-328.

²⁶⁰Ibid., 328-329.

Paul follows the Septuagint (*exegeira*), indicating that God put him in office. Third, “the superior act of God is set in the context of the history of salvation. It is an act that does not destroy man’s free will and activity, but that comprises everything. It precedes man’s deeds, because God acts within those deeds of man—in Pharaoh’s hardening of heart—and thus proceeds triumphantly and purposefully.” Thus he claims Paul’s purpose is not to look at the individual fate of Pharaoh, but rather his place in the history of salvation.

Berkouwer holds that Pharaoh’s stubbornness cannot derail God from saving Israel, but provides an example of God’s power. Thus the hardening (Exod 8:18) should not be understood as an “allowing to harden,” for Paul’s primary concern is not the ruin of the wicked, though ordained by God’s counsel and will, but to point to God’s mercy, power, and freedom in the history of salvation. Romans 9:19-20, 22 demonstrates that God shows His wrath against those made for destruction, and predestined before their births. Once more, this is a mystery in that it lies in God’s hidden counsel. He adds that Paul does not want to indicate two separate lines, the vessels of wrath (fact of reprobation) and the objects of God’s longsuffering (fact of election). Rather Paul demonstrates that in “God’s wrath against Israel the riches of His glory are made known—concerning us ‘whom He also called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles’” (Rom 9:24).²⁶¹

Pharisees

Berkouwer sees four issues that led to the Pharisees’ damnation. The first was that in their criticizing Christ, their *contra*-character and deception were evident. They were

²⁶¹Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 212-214.

despisers of the law, though ostensibly they intended a legal and religious piety. It was this, and the religious sham in which the contra found its place, that Christ inveighed against (i.e., they had religion without the power of true godliness). Their sin involved a boasting of righteousness while their lives were anti-religious.²⁶²

Second, they imagined themselves to be without sin. Their familiarity with the law warped their view of grace and Christ; thus they ended up in hypocrisy. This in turn, affected their prayers and ritualism, masking their unbelief. In their boundless admiration for the law, they had removed it from the context of the covenant of grace and enjoined it to the total complex of stipulations they demanded be carried out. Berkouwer explains that having abstracted the law from the gospel, they came to regard religion as merit based,²⁶³ resulting in their resisting the Messiah and the Holy Spirit.²⁶⁴ They “exemplified the abysmal apostasy of man’s heart and necessitated this stern rebuke.”²⁶⁵ Such godlessness is alienation from a true sense of the law, which occurs when the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith (the fruit of the Spirit and the character of God) are neglected. “Scripture is concerned with *man in all of his acts*. It has to do with the *esse* of his *operari*, or the *tree* which bears *fruit* (Matt 7:17ff.).”²⁶⁶

Third, the Pharisees believed they were doing God a service by allowing Him a place. Berkouwer states their nomism made them view others as less than themselves (Luke 18:11). Having broken the connection between faith and sanctification, they

²⁶²Berkouwer, *Sin*, 238-239.

²⁶³Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 118-119.

²⁶⁴Berkouwer, *Sin*, 348.

²⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 340.

²⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 316-317.

possessed a degenerate sanctification in that their striving for holiness was not based on divine grace, but rather on vanity.

Finally, the Pharisees were guilty of both a flagrant denial and a spiteful misrepresentation of the obvious; for the Holy Spirit's power was present at the exorcism, which they assigned to Satan (Matt 12:24; Mark 3:30).²⁶⁷

Judas

Berkouwer makes the point that Satan's activity, power, and seduction are interconnected with the results of this conspiracy manifest on every hand. Satan deceives the nations (Rev 20:3, 8) and "reaches to the very depths of man's heart and turns him aside to Satan (1 Tim 5:15). We read that Satan 'put' it in Judas' heart to betray Christ (John 13:2) and 'entered into' Judas (13:27)."²⁶⁸ Thus Judas is an example of one who denied Christ and blasphemed the Holy Spirit.²⁶⁹

In summary, Berkouwer claims God raised up Pharaoh for the specific purpose of displaying His power. However, there is a tension in that he believes Pharaoh hardened his own heart, yet was in God's hand. Pharaoh is an example of those made for destruction and predestined prior to birth. Berkouwer resolves this tension by identifying it as a mystery. The Pharisees provide additional insight into the unpardonable sin, for their religion was merit based and they believed themselves to be without sin. In this context they believed themselves to be doing God service by allowing Him a place. Their sin was a flagrant denial and misrepresentation of the Holy Spirit's power, which they

²⁶⁷Ibid., 327-328.

²⁶⁸Ibid., 110-111.

²⁶⁹Ibid., 346.

assigned to Satan. Lastly, Satan placed betrayal in Judas's heart.

Facilitators

Berkouwer claims that through brazen insolence man becomes the victim of sin. However, while not wanting to undervalue deliberate and willful sin when dealing with the unpardonable sin, he is referring to “a *special kind* of deliberateness and stubbornness, and not merely with a *psychological* attitude which characterizes our sin.”²⁷⁰

Noting Calvin's rejection of Augustine's position that the unpardonable sin is *inpoenitentia finalis* (final impenitence), Berkouwer recognizes two things: first, all sin is tainted by impenitence, and thus in a way, all sin could be classified as final; and second, the sin is the result of “bitter and hardhearted resistance.” That it is impossible for a sinner to repent of the unpardonable sin, or to be restored again, is not so much the magnitude of the sin as it is the subjective disposition of the heart. The sinner excludes the final possibility of renewal, determining its unforgivableness. Stubbornness in this sin “is more than a simple reluctance and a dogged obstinacy, and is bound up with the salvation which has appeared in Christ. It is therefore a brazen obduracy and contemptible stiffheadedness.”²⁷¹ He notes that Eph 4:30-31 and 1 Thess 5:19 should be understood in the light of the unpardonable sin.²⁷² He sees grieving the Holy Spirit as a possible allusion to Isa 63:10 and part of Eph 4:30 which speak of the saints being “sealed for the day of redemption.” He argues that admonitions not to resist the Holy

²⁷⁰Ibid., 336.

²⁷¹Ibid., 347-349.

²⁷²Ibid., 351.

Spirit should be understood as part of the full fabric of the gospel and of the “entire preaching of the Spirit of Christ.”²⁷³

In summary, Berkouwer maintains there is a specific deliberateness and stubbornness to the unpardonable sin. The inability of the sinner to repent is due to a subjective disposition of the heart that excludes the possibility of forgiveness.

Indications For and Against the Unpardonable Sin

Berkouwer provides several indicators for the commission of the sin against the Holy Spirit. First, is the “*rejection of God’s good invitation*” that comes through the preaching of the gospel, irrespective of the offense.²⁷⁴ Second, is the presence of profanity.²⁷⁵ Third, folly: “It is the fool who says in his heart, ‘There is no God’ (Ps 14:1; 53:1). Folly is synonymous with blaspheming God’s name (Ps 74:18, 22).”²⁷⁶ Finally, it is willful enmity against God.²⁷⁷

An indication against the sin having been committed, termed by Berkouwer as an antidote or counter-evidence that one has not crossed the “final border,” is the exercising of love and good works.²⁷⁸ Within the context of his comments on love, this could be understood as love in all its various accents; the practice of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

²⁷³Ibid.

²⁷⁴Ibid., 345.

²⁷⁵Ibid., 323.

²⁷⁶Ibid., 138.

²⁷⁷Ibid., 326.

²⁷⁸Ibid. 344.

Steps in the Sin (Falling Away)

Berkouwer holds up the biblical admonitions against radical apostasy, unbelief, estrangement, slothfulness, and obduracy, including the call not to quench the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19) and the warning that if we deny Christ, He will deny us (2 Tim 2:13).²⁷⁹ He also connects the grieving of the Holy Spirit to Isa 63:10. In doing so he attaches the term *Deus auctor et cause peccati* as a re-echo of Isaiah's referral to this grieving of the Holy Spirit because of human rebelliousness.²⁸⁰ He sees Scripture portraying serious lapses into sin and that some shall fall away from the faith (1 Tim 4:1). He also recognizes Peter's statement that having escaped the pollutions of the world and becoming once more entangled, their situation is now worse than before and they would have been better off having never known the truth (2 Pet 2:20-21).²⁸¹

Berkouwer questions whether the above scriptural realities eliminate the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. He refers to the pneumatological and Christological texts of Hebrews 6 (v. 4ff.) and 2 Pet 2:1, acknowledging there "is apparently the possibility of willfully sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth. Then there is no more sacrifice for sin, but only a more heavy punishment for him 'who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite to the Spirit of grace'" (Heb 10:26). Yet he asks if there might be a way back for the elect and whether after entering the kingdom, the gate is locked forever, while recognizing the

²⁷⁹Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 87.

²⁸⁰Berkouwer, *Sin*, 42-43.

²⁸¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 87-88.

need to adhere to Christ's admonition to watch and pray.²⁸² Berkouwer does not provide an answer. However, if there are steps in the sin, then for those once enlightened it is simply the matter of a falling away from the truth. But this must be understood within the context that he does not believe that the elect can commit the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Role of Conscience

Berkouwer recognizes that many view the conscience as having a certain aura of holiness and unassailability, and associates it with God's voice in man's heart, making it inviolable. If so, this would mean it is transcendent and present in every person, even those living in alienation from God. However, he rejects that one can view it as something retaining a relative goodness and unaffected by corruption.

He sees conscience as something that witnesses to the goodness of God's law. Conscience is knowing that one walks uprightly. Berkouwer uses the word *syneidesis*, which he understands to involve a knowledge of conformity to God's law, which in turn is coupled to boldness in the assurance of Him that is true (Heb 10:19, 23), and provides a believer with the certainty that his heart is "sprinkled from an evil conscience" (Heb 10:22). As such, *syneidesis* does not indicate a separate organ of morality, but is conscious of being in good relationship with God. In this way it is closely linked to salvation, baptism, sanctification, and purification (Heb 9:14).

Berkouwer does not see the conscience as separate from the heart with which one believes. Conscience expresses the richness of life in communion with God and the prospect of salvation resonating in the inner life and leading to a godly boldness. It does not mean having a remnant of natural goodness, but it is rather the assurance of faith by

²⁸²Ibid., 88-89.

which we walk through life.²⁸³ He says our consciences are also “stamped with the things that we do wrong.”²⁸⁴

Berkouwer notes that Paul implies the conscience is not holy, but is relative to idolatry (1 Cor 8:11). Yet while it does not limit corruption or prevent alienation from God, the conscience does react against evil to the extent that it protests through self-accusation when one has not yet withdrawn from that which is holy and good, or from the ever-present commandments of God. It does not break through human alienation or restore life’s harmony. One must understand that while not unassailable, conscience indicates to him disharmony and denigration by which life’s unity seems to be lost, and by which man accuses himself. It can err, can be weak, and can adapt religiously, morally, and sociologically. It can condemn the good and approve the bad. Because of this, he cautions that the conscience should not be identified as the voice of God. It should be seen as a human reaction which is restless until in a good and pure conscience one finds rest in God. At this point, “when the believer, still conscious of the gulf that there yet exists between the old man and the new, speaks of the heart, which condemns us (1 John 3:20), then only through the knowledge that God is greater than our heart can he advance to that godly boldness which presupposes the good conscience, and to rest in the unity of his life in communion with God.”²⁸⁵

In a direct connecting of the conscience to the sin against the Holy Spirit, Berkouwer claims it is reasonable to hold that regarding with dread the possibility of

²⁸³Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 171-174.

²⁸⁴Berkouwer, *Sin*, 318.

²⁸⁵Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 174-177.

having committed that sin is a “sure index that one has not committed this sin.”²⁸⁶ This creates a tension with his contra position that the conscience can regard bad as good and good as bad.²⁸⁷

In summary, Berkouwer understands the conscience to be totally corrupted, yet at the same time as man’s witness to the goodness of God and the means by which man is able to believe in God. As such, he argues that a person’s dread of having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit is evidence that person has not committed that sin.

Safeguards

Berkouwer believes the surest safeguard against committing the sin against the Holy Spirit is to don the armor of Eph 6, for that armor “repels the most violent enemy.” Putting on the whole armor, and especially the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17), is therefore of utmost importance.²⁸⁸

General Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has surveyed Berkouwer’s theology to show how its various elements affect his understanding of the unpardonable sin. This, in turn, will enable a comparison between his theology on this topic and that of Ellen G. White. Berkouwer’s hermeneutics, perspectives on human nature, and understanding of divine determinism inform his understanding of the unpardonable sin.

Within the context of his understanding of biblical hermeneutics, Berkouwer sees

²⁸⁶Berkouwer, *Sin*, 343.

²⁸⁷Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 176.

²⁸⁸Berkouwer, *Sin*, 353.

salvation as dependent upon divine election. Man is lost and can only be sought and found by another—God. Man cannot contribute anything toward his salvation. Unconditional divine election is the only means of his salvation. He rejects any human synergism or determinism, for he believes God cannot grant salvation on the basis of human decision. Thus God does not recognize man's decision nor his function in relation to his salvation. Yet man does play a role in his damnation, with judgment being the result of divine rejection. While God is responsible for election, He should not be blamed for man's reprobation.

Berkouwer's understanding of faith is consistent with his compatibilist theology—he believes human choice and perseverance have no influence upon his faith; they are non-coordinate factors in salvation. Faith does not work synergistically with divine power, but primarily rests in God's sovereign work, confirming God's election of man to the man.

For Berkouwer, both justification and sanctification are dependent upon election. Not all are justified simply because not all are elected. Thus justification, sanctification, and perseverance come independent of human synergism and nomism. The Holy Spirit orchestrates change through His divine superiority.

In the direct context of his teaching regarding the unpardonable sin, Berkouwer maintains that the fear of having committed the sin is sufficient proof that one has not committed it. Furthermore, Berkouwer sees no link between sin and divine reprobation. He posits sin to be an indirect good, because in a sense sin is from God and not man.

Berkouwer uses Pharaoh as an example of those God brought to life specifically

for the purpose of displaying His divine power, and whom He thus predestined for destruction.

Based upon the above summary, we can rightly assume that Berkouwer is faithful to his compatibilist presuppositions regarding the unpardonable sin, the cause of which is divine determinism. Moreover, he is confronted by our unavoidable conclusion that within the framework of his theological presuppositions, divine election is the facilitator of the unpardonable sin.

This chapter helps prepare the way for chapter 6, where I will address the question that the unpardonable sin raises regarding the character of God. In the pursuance of this objective, this chapter has provided a brief survey of Berkouwer's understanding of faith, justification, sanctification, perseverance, the role of the Holy Spirit, the role of conscience, and his understanding of the doctrine of sin. Similarly, the chapter that follows covers Ellen G. White's theological presuppositions and view of the unpardonable sin, all of which leads up to my conclusions regarding the answer to the question proposed by this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN: ELLEN G. WHITE

Theological Assumptions and Presuppositions

Ellen G. White's doctrine of the unpardonable sin rises from the foundation of her theology of sin and salvation. This chapter first presents that foundation and then the doctrine that is the focus of this dissertation.

Nature of Scripture

All of Scripture is a revelation coming through and centered in Christ.¹ It is the perfect standard of truth.² It is what Ellen White terms the inspired word or words of God,³ and inspiration,⁴ sufficient to enlighten, and capable of comprehension by all. It is a book of "principles for the formation of correct habits of living," defining man's duty to God and man.⁵ As such, it is addressed to all, irrespective of time or culture, clarifying the "conditions upon which salvation is provided."⁶ It is impossible for the human mind

¹"The Office of the Mirror" [Jas 1:25], *SDABC*, 7:935.

²Ellen G. White, *Education* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1952), 17.

³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*. 9 vols. (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1949), 6:96-97.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 198.

⁵Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:663-665.

⁶Ellen G. White, "The Bible to Be Understood by All," *Signs of the Times*, August 20, 1894, 643.

to exhaust even one of its truths or promises,⁷ and should not be tested by “men’s ideas of science,” but all should aim for a “settled belief” in its divine authority.⁸

White holds that in “ancient times God spoke to men by the mouth of prophets and apostles”⁹ through the direction of holy angels, who communicated by symbols, signs, and illustrations.¹⁰ The inspired writers did not use “God’s mode of thought and expression,” for God does not put Himself on trial in words, rhetoric, or logic. The writers were His penmen rather than His pen. Thus they, rather than the words, were inspired:

Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.”¹¹

Alberto Timm concurs, stating that the prophets “were called by God to speak to the people in their own language. But the divine empowerment did not make void the individuality of each prophet.”¹² Ellen G. White agrees, adding that the Holy Spirit intervened in this process, remedying by enhancing memory,¹³ helping with the

⁷Ellen G. White, *Education*, 171.

⁸Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 114.

⁹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:661.

¹⁰Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1980), 1:17.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 1:21.

¹²Alberto R. Timm, “Divine Accommodation and Cultural Conditioning of the Inspired Writings,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 19/1-2 (2008): 162.

¹³*Ibid.*, 1:36-37.

occasional word,¹⁴ or providing new revelation.¹⁵

In that God works thus with the process of scriptural and prophetic inspiration, Fernando Canale observes the “idea that God acts historically in time, which is assumed by the biblical writers and Ellen G. White and which lies at the foundation of the Great Controversy theme, requires a reinterpretation of the philosophical hermeneutical presuppositions that underlie encounter revelation, verbal inspiration, and thought inspiration, understood as a radical dichotomy between words and thoughts.”¹⁶

Through Christ’s power Scripture empowers men and women to break the chains of sinful habit, overcome selfishness, and from bearing the “likeness of Satan” they are “transformed into the image of God.” White calls this the “miracle of miracles” and one of Scripture’s greatest mysteries.¹⁷

White argues that her writings do not replace Scripture,¹⁸ yet have relevance because many neglect God’s Word.¹⁹ She saw her writings as a “lesser light” to lead her readers to Scripture, the “greater light.”²⁰ The analogy of the moon’s relationship to the sun is appropriate in that just as the moon reflects the sun’s light and thus enlightens what would otherwise be periods of physical darkness, so the non-canonical writings and

¹⁴Ellen G. White, “Ellen White Unable to Sleep,” *Manuscript Release*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990-1993), 2:156-157.

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3:36, 110.

¹⁶Fernando Canale, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 63.

¹⁷Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2001), 476-478.

¹⁸Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Garmire, 12 August 1890, Letter 12, 1890; “Address to Bible Workers and Ministers,” MS 7, 1894, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:664-665.

²⁰Ellen G. White, *Colporteur Evangelist* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1920), 37.

preaching of God's messengers have brought men back to the light of God's Word through their faithful reflection of Scripture's light in periods of spiritual darkness.

Salvation is dependent upon the knowledge of God's will as revealed in Scripture. Man is thus accountable to know God's Word. Knowledge must be joined to the exercise of faith.²¹ Only those diligent in the Word will be shielded from delusions and the deceiver. White adds that it is through tribulation that God's children will be sifted.²²

For a person to receive unadulterated truth, he must approach Scripture at the invitation of the Holy Spirit and with a realization of God's presence. White states that the spirit in which it is studied determines the "character of the assistant" present. Angels "will be with those who in humility of heart seek for divine guidance." But if it is opened irreverently, self-sufficiently, or in prejudice, Satan perverts the "plain statements of God's word."²³ Human supposition should be avoided,²⁴ and Scripture must be studied with much prayer and with a contrite and humble heart free of cultivated human ideas, former opinions and prejudices. If the reader is convicted that opinions he has cherished are out of harmony with Scripture, he should not realign it to fit personal opinion. Rather, he should realign personal opinion with it in order that his feet may be firmly planted "on the eternal Rock."²⁵

Essential principles of godliness (e.g., purity of heart, holiness) are missed because there is not a hunger for Scripture. The result is pride, selfishness, hatred,

²¹Ellen G. White, "Search the Scriptures," *Youth's Instructor*, July 24, 1902, 1.

²²Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 625.

²³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1962), 107-108.

²⁴Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002), 601.

²⁵Ellen G. White, "Search the Scriptures," *YI*, July 24, 1902, 1.

jealousy, and envy, which beclouds man's perceptive powers.²⁶ White posits that those “who turn from the plain teaching of Scripture and the convicting power of God's Holy Spirit are inviting the control of demons.”²⁷

In summary, White understands Scripture to be the Word of God coming through the human writer, yet centered in Christ. The writer was God's penman rather than His pen; thus the men, rather than the words are inspired. These men were imbued with God's thoughts as the Holy Spirit enhanced memory and kept the content trustworthy. Rightly received, Scripture empowers man's transformation into the image of God. Therefore, salvation is dependent upon knowledge of God's will as revealed in Scripture. For this to occur, the Holy Spirit must preside over the study of Scripture. The Bible must be studied with a contrite and humble heart void of personal opinion.

Human Nature: Ontology of the Unpardonable Sin

The “image of God in man” permeates Ellen White's understanding of human nature, justification, regeneration, sanctification, perfection, and holiness. Created in God's image, with “moral faculties,”²⁸ all were “endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think,” and act,²⁹ with minds capable of comprehending divine things. This included understanding, memory, and imagination to respect his obligations to God.³⁰ This perspective is shared with that of Arminius who

²⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:665. Paul lists these vices as “works of the Flesh” (Gal 5:19-21).

²⁷Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 258.

²⁸Ellen G. White, “Sacrificed for Us,” *YI*, July 20, 1899, 2; idem, *Selected Messages*, 3:133.

²⁹Ellen G. White, *Education*, 17.

³⁰Ellen G. White, “Marriages, Wise and Unwise,” *YI*, August 10, 1899, 1.

holds that to be created in God's image includes the two facilities of understanding and an independent human will.³¹ Prior to the Fall, human nature was in harmony with God's will. With pure affection, "appetites and passions were under the control of reason." Man was perfectly obedient, holy, and happy. He was "of lofty stature and perfect symmetry. His countenance bore the ruddy tint of health, and glowed with the light of life and joy."³² He reflected God's mental, physical, and spiritual nature. White extends the Arminian view of the nature of man by adding man's creation with a physical resemblance to God. This likeness has been impacted by the Fall, and man's redemption.³³ As God's crowning work, man was designed to be His counterpart,³⁴ yet a little lower than the angels.³⁵ She disagreed with Arminius's view that the soul is immortal,³⁶ and found common ground with Adam Clark who held that man was created with the intention of immortality, but that sin resulted in man becoming subject to death, making immortality conditional.³⁷ However, White went further than Clark in that she linked conditional immortality to a post-second advent of Christ and made it contingent upon man receiving final salvation.

Sin "marred, and well-nigh obliterated" this image. Man lost his "resemblance to

³¹Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 2:62-64.

³²Ellen G. White, *Education*, 146-148.

³³Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15-16.

³⁴Ellen G. White, "Go Ye Into All the World," *RH*, June 11, 1895, 369.

³⁵Ellen G. White, *Confrontation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1971), 32.

³⁶Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 2:62-64.

³⁷Clark, *Christian Theology*, 88-89.

the Creator” when he fell out of harmony with God’s will.³⁸ His “physical powers were weakened, his mental capacity was lessened, [and] his spiritual vision dimmed.”³⁹ Yet fallen humanity was not without hope. As a result of Christ accepting the penalty that should have been executed upon man, man was “free to accept the righteousness of Christ and by a life of penitence and humiliation to triumph, as the Son of God had triumphed over the power of Satan.”⁴⁰ God would place enmity between Satan and those who chose to be His children. Such enmity “is not naturally entertained. When man transgressed the divine law, his nature became evil, and he was in harmony, and not at variance, with Satan.”⁴¹ On Satan’s part, the enmity exists because man is the object of divine love and mercy. From redeemed humanity, it is the “grace that Christ implants in the soul which creates in man enmity against Satan. Without this converting grace and renewing power, man would continue the captive of Satan.” Christ imparts power to man to resist the devil. “Whoever is seen to abhor sin instead of loving it, whoever resists and conquers those passions that have held sway within, displays the operation of a principle wholly from above.”⁴²

In his work on Ellen G. White’s perspective of the fallen nature of man, Robert W. Olson holds that through that single transgression of Adam, condemnation came to all (Rom 5:18) and humanity became children of wrath (Eph 2:3). The human heart is

³⁸Ellen G. White, “The Condition of Acceptance,” *RH*, February 14, 1888, 97-98.

³⁹Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15-16.

⁴⁰Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 503.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 505.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 506.

naturally depraved and evil; for selfishness is inwrought in our very being.⁴³

White states God devised the plan of salvation, offering man probationary life to provide an antecedent opportunity for the restoration of God's image, and restore man to the "perfection in which he was created," through the development of body, mind, and soul. This is God's "great work of redemption,"⁴⁴ and fits mankind to become temples of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

Image of God

Through sin, Ellen White says Satan marred and distorted the image of God in man, placing upon him the stamp of his own image and character, with the purpose of obliterating God's image through man's transgression of God's law and to keep him from heaven.⁴⁶ Man's character lost its harmony with God's.⁴⁷ Self-love is at the root of God's lost image in man, and is blind "to the perfection which God requires" (Matt 5:48).⁴⁸ All—irrespective of ethnicity—still bear His image. "To show contempt for, to manifest hatred toward any nation, is to reveal the characteristic of Satan. The Father has placed his estimate upon man in giving Jesus."⁴⁹ No matter how degraded men have become, Christ died for and longs to reshape "marred human character, to restore the moral image

⁴³Robert W. Olson, *The Humanity of Christ: Selections from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1989), 12-13.

⁴⁴Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15-16.

⁴⁵Ellen G. White, "Restoration of the Image of God," *MR*, 9:371.

⁴⁶Ellen G. White, "The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven," *ST*, August 21, 1893, 645.

⁴⁷Ellen G. White, "Surpassing Love Revealed in His Plans," *ST*, December 15, 1914, 1.

⁴⁸Ellen G. White, MS 78, 1901, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁴⁹Ellen G. White, "The Good Shepherd's Estimate of a Lost Sheep," *ST*, November 20, 1893, 35.

of God in men”⁵⁰ and give them His regeneration and eternal life.⁵¹

Christ’s first advent was intended to recreate the image of God in man by: (1) salvation from sin; (2) man abiding in Christ; and (3) the resultant change in the traits of man’s character to the similitude of His own. White says that in this regeneration and perfection after God’s perfection, man’s “original loveliness begins to be restored.” The attributes of Christ’s character “are imparted to the soul, and the image of the divine begins to shine forth.”⁵² His grace draws men “in obedience to the truth.”⁵³ These are the merits and power of Christ which man must fully reflect,⁵⁴ which is how man reveals God’s glory. All “who will enter the kingdom of God will develop a character that is the counterpart” of God’s. This is achieved “by the transforming agency of His grace”⁵⁵ through the power of His Word.⁵⁶ Christ fashions man’s character after “the pattern of His divine character,” making it beautiful with His own glory.⁵⁷

Transformation is sequential: (1) as temptation is resisted, man is freed from slavery to sin and Satan (this requires cooperation with and dependence on God);⁵⁸ (2) the heart is purified and all is changed; (3) the Holy Spirit produces a new life, bringing

⁵⁰Ellen G. White, “Character Tested by Small Occurrences,” *RH*, October 15, 1895, 657.

⁵¹Ellen G. White, “The Good Shepherd’s Estimate of a Lost Sheep,” *ST*, November 20, 1893, 36.

⁵²Ellen G. White, “The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven,” *ST*, August 21, 1893, 645-646.

⁵³Ellen G. White, *Councils to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press), 249.

⁵⁴Ellen G. White, “Restoration of the Image of God,” *MR*, 9:379.

⁵⁵Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 391.

⁵⁶Ellen G. White, *Education*, 126.

⁵⁷Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 32-38.

⁵⁸Ellen G. White, “Restoration of the Image of God,” *MR*, 9:377.

one's thoughts and desires into obedience to Christ's will; and, (4) "the inward man is renewed in the image of God." The world becomes witness to the redeeming power and grace that can develop symmetry (balance) and fruitfulness in man.⁵⁹ This is the result of dwelling upon the perfection of Christ's character. The "mind is renewed, and the soul is re-created in the image of God."⁶⁰ Character perfection is gained through trial. Even though in the Christian life trial is unavoidable, sufficient grace is provided that men and women may bear them. "We are individually called to go through temptations and trials." However, the object of permitted trial is perfection in grace and love, that the "image of selfishness may disappear, and the image of Christ appear in our characters. . . . The soul polluted by sin, through divine power is recreated after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness."⁶¹

White claims that those sealed must reflect the image (character) of Jesus.⁶² This sealing is the result of receiving and retaining God's moral image.⁶³ The plan of redemption, the restoration of the image of God in the human soul, is the focus of all Scripture. "He who grasps this thought has before him an infinite field for study. He has the key that will unlock to him the whole treasure house of God's word."⁶⁴ It is also the object of all true education, underlying every other object in life.⁶⁵

⁵⁹Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2006), 233.

⁶⁰Ellen G. White, *Education*, 18.

⁶¹Ellen G. White, "The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven," *ST*, August 21, 1893, 646.

⁶²Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1978), 71.

⁶³Ellen G. White, "The Enduring Treasure (Concluded)," *RH*, March 15, 1892, 161-162.

⁶⁴Ellen G. White, *Education*, 125-126.

⁶⁵Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 595.

After Our Likeness

While Ellen White does not clearly differentiate between “the image of God” and “after our likeness,” she distinguishes between moral and physical similarities between man and his Creator. Men and women were created with a form resembling God’s. The human body is a likeness of the divine. God “has given a specimen of himself; for man was made in the image of God.”⁶⁶ Men and women were “formed in the likeness of God,”⁶⁷ with physical powers that were a “sinless transcript of Himself.”⁶⁸ Their form was graceful and symmetrical, “regular and beautiful in feature, their countenances glowing with the tint of health and the light of joy and hope, they bore in outward resemblance the likeness of their Maker.”⁶⁹

White states that God promised immortality on condition of obedience, but this was forfeited through transgression. In that Adam and Eve were incapable of transmitting that which they did not have, humanity does not currently have immortality (Rom 5:12). It is a conditional offer through Christ (2 Tim 1:10; John 3:36) at the second coming by the granting of eternal life (Rom 2:7).⁷⁰

This likeness became corrupted through the indulgence of sinful practices.⁷¹ White calls Satan the originator of the promise of unconditional immortality. He gave

⁶⁶Ellen G. White to Captain Eldridge, August 30, 1896, Letter 28, 1896, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁶⁷Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 45.

⁶⁸Ellen G. White, “Sacrificed for Us,” *YI*, July 20, 1899, 1; idem, *Selected Messages*, 3:133.

⁶⁹Ellen G. White, *Education*, 20.

⁷⁰Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 533.

⁷¹Ellen G. White, “Satan’s Malignity against Christ and His People,” *RH*, October 22, 1895, 301-302.

“the first sermon ever preached upon the immortality of the soul.”⁷² His promise was deceptive. God removed Adam and Eve from Eden to prevent the perpetuation of conditional immortality, for it is not available to sinners.⁷³ At the second coming, Christ will provide the redeemed and now sinless man with the finishing touch of immortality.⁷⁴

White says that the world “is opposed to righteousness (purity of character), and especially to growth in grace.” Humanity suffers from defilement, corruption, and the deformity of sin, and these are opposed to all that must be accomplished in man prior to “receiving the gift of immortality.” The bodies of God’s elect must be made holy, which is the result of the Holy Spirit having perfect control and influence over every action.⁷⁵

Restoration to God’s Image and Likeness

God’s transformation of man is to be completed prior to Christ’s return. Ellen White claims that those who have persisted in sanctification will receive immortality. No work will then be done to remove their defects and give them holy characters. We are “now in God’s workshop. Many of us are rough stones from the quarry. But as we lay hold upon the truth of God, its influence affects us.” It is in this way that we are prepared for God’s kingdom. It is here that this work is to be accomplished for us, here that we are to be “fitted for immortality.”⁷⁶

In summary, White argues that men and women were created as counterparts to

⁷²Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 533.

⁷³Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4 vols. (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1949), 1:114-115.

⁷⁴Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:355-356.

⁷⁵Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), 20.

⁷⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:355-356.

God, a little lower than angels, and a reflection of God's mental, physical, and spiritual nature. Sin almost obliterated this image and likeness. Satan filled the void by endowing man with his character; thus self-love gained supremacy. Christ came to restore His image (character) and likeness in man. This transformation is a process and results in the restoration of the fruit of the Spirit. This plan of redemption is the focus of all Scripture and must be completed prior to eternal life and the gift of immortality.

Having viewed Ellen White's perspectives regarding human nature, we will now take a brief look at her position regarding divine determinism. The terms she uses are *foreknowledge* and *election of God*.

Foreknowledge and Election of God

John Wesley argued that while some individuals, by reason of education, culture, or circumstance, might hold certain advantages or disadvantages in regard to an initial knowledge of or relationship with God, ultimately such advantages or disadvantages do not materially affect the workings of divine grace.⁷⁷ Such occasions in which God withholds Himself from an individual are unrelated to the divine will.⁷⁸

Ellen White's position regarding the divine will is in harmony with that of John Wesley. She cautions against fault-finding and being judgmental. People should rather ensure that they are among God's elect (1 Pet 1:2), for the elect are so due to their personal walk with Christ.⁷⁹ The goal of all should be personal faithfulness to the Creator

⁷⁷Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1:426-427.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 6:98.

⁷⁹Ellen G. White, MS 75a, 1900, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

who has divine foreknowledge⁸⁰ and election. She does not link this to divine redemptive determinism, for Scripture does not teach that God arbitrarily blinds the spiritual eyes of any. Christ's work is to soften hardened hearts, but if Christ's work is resisted, "the sure result would be that their hearts would become hardened." She qualifies her position, stating "prophecies do not shape the characters of the men who fulfill them. Men act out their own free will, either in accordance with a character placed under the molding of God or a character placed under the harsh rule of Satan."⁸¹

There is no such thing in the Word of God as unconditional election—once in grace, always in grace. In the second chapter of Second Peter the subject is made plain and distinct. After a history of some who followed an evil course, the explanation is given: "Which have forsaken the right way . . . following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness." 2 Pet 2:15. . . . Here is a class of whom the apostle warns, "For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them." 2 Pet 2:21.⁸²

In summary, White maintains election is due to one's personal walk with Christ. There is no such thing as unconditional election as Christ works in favor of the salvation of all. Moreover, biblical prophecy does not shape the characters of anyone, for all act in accordance with their individual free wills.

The Human Will

White's views on the freedom of the human will are steeped in Arminian theology beginning with James Arminius who wrote that,

[man] was endowed with such a portion of knowledge, holiness and power as enabled him to . . . will, and to perform THE TRUE GOOD, according to the

⁸⁰Ellen G. White, "Robbing God—No. 1," *RH*, December 3, 1901, 777.

⁸¹Ellen G. White, "Walk in the Light," *RH*, November 13, 1900, 1.

⁸²"No Unconditional Election" [Eph 1:4, 5, 11], *SDABC*, 6:1114.

commandment delivered to him. Yet none of these acts could he do, *except through the assistance of Divine Grace*. But in his *lapsed and sinful state*, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good.⁸³

If man were not free, Wesley wrote, he “could not be accountable either for his thoughts, words, or actions.” Such a state would disqualify him from either reward or punishment and he would be incapable of any personal virtue or vice. Man would then be neither morally good nor bad.⁸⁴ Adam Clark added that “God uniformly treats man as a free agent; and on this principle the whole divine revelation is constructed, as is also the doctrine of future rewards and punishments. If a man be forced to believe, he believes not at all: it is the forcing power that believes, not the machine forced.”⁸⁵

Building upon the above perspectives, Ellen White’s understanding of the will is tied to the unpardonable sin. Life’s choices stand for eternity. All receive eternal life or death with no middle ground or second probation. God calls on all to overcome as Christ did in order to receive eternal life. God “has provided us with abundant opportunities and privileges, making it possible for us to overcome. But in order to do this, there must be in our lives no petting of self. All selfishness must be cut out by the roots.”⁸⁶

The Holy Spirit continually seeks to convict of sin, righteousness, and coming

⁸³Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 1:252-253.

⁸⁴Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 6:226-227.

⁸⁵Adam Clark, *Holiness Miscellany: Essays by Dr. Adam Clark and Richard Watson, Experiences of Bishop Foster, Rev. Geo. Peck, D.D., Rev. Alfred Cookman, Ref. J. A. Wood, Rev. E. M. Levy, D.D., and D. Steele, D.D.* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Association for the Promotion of Holiness, 1882), 360-361.

⁸⁶Ellen G. White, “Sowing and Reaping,” *YI*, May 9, 1901, 4.

judgment. White posits that strength and grace are provided to the will so man may resist temptation. There is a progression by which, under these conditions, the conscience becomes “tender and sensitive,” and sin is regarded as exceedingly sinful.⁸⁷ White explains further

Many are inquiring, “How am I to make the surrender of myself to God?” You desire to give yourself to Him, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair. What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him.⁸⁸

Wrongful use of the will freely commits men to a course of ignoring the convictions of conscience and thus insulting the Holy Spirit. Mercy is despised and justice defied in rebellion against God. Such become spiritually palsied because they will not submit to God, which results in their losing the desire to repent.⁸⁹ White says this happens when Satan is allowed to mold the will by stirring “up the evil propensities, awakening unholy passions and ambitions.” Conscience is blunted and human faculties become degraded and captive to sin.⁹⁰ A progression is evident. Satan tempts man in the

⁸⁷Ellen G. White, “The Religion That Is Unto Salvation,” *ST*, September 4, 1893, 679.

⁸⁸Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 47.

⁸⁹Ellen G. White, “Sin and Its Results,” *RH*, June 4, 1901, 355.

⁹⁰Ellen G. White, “Our Battle with Evil,” *RH*, August 25, 1896, 533.

guise of good. Once yielded to, each violation prepares for the next, “and wrongs are repeated, until the heart of unbelief becomes hardened, and the conscience loses its sensitiveness.”⁹¹

In summary, White argues that human choice stands for eternity. The Holy Spirit enables one to overcome, provided there is a willingness to put self aside. An individual becomes spiritually incapacitated when he or she refuses to repent.

Role of Grace

Grace is unmerited favor,⁹² and God provides it in abundance to keep the soul free from sin. Ellen White says it is unlimited and placed at the believer’s command that he may “draw from the well of salvation.” This grace justifies one freely through Christ for the redemption of sinners, propitiation for past sins, and forgiveness (remission) of sins of those who believe in Christ (Rom 3:24-26; Eph 2:8; and John 1:14-16).⁹³ This is in keeping with John Wesley’s position that grace is God’s free love in and for all. It is free in all to whom it is given, independent of any power or merit in the recipient, and righteousness is the fruit rather than the root of it.⁹⁴

Role of Faith

Having been a Methodist in her formative years, Ellen White was anchored in Arminian thinking regarding grace. Such theology taught that repentance and faith answer each other. In repentance the sinner recognizes that sin remains in the heart,

⁹¹Ellen G. White, MS 9, 1903, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁹²Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:398.

⁹³Ibid., 1:394.

⁹⁴Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 7:374.

words, and actions, and is cognizant of deserved punishment for attitudes, words, and actions, and that there is no help in us. By faith one is conscious that Christ is our Advocate, “continually turning aside all condemnation and punishment,” and thereby we receive mercy and grace. Repentance “disclaims the very possibility of any other help,” while faith accepts help from God.⁹⁵

Faith is the act “by which the whole man is given over to the guardianship and control of Jesus Christ.” White holds that Christ and man abide in each other when faith is supreme and the believer commits his whole being to God. “The soul is washed in the blood of Christ and clothed with His righteousness.”⁹⁶ Faith is neither feeling⁹⁷ nor impulse,⁹⁸ but the means by which God’s grace is received. It earns nothing, but is “the hand by which we lay hold upon Christ and appropriate His merits.”⁹⁹ It is constantly needed,¹⁰⁰ and rests upon the evidence of God’s Word, not upon perfect knowledge.¹⁰¹ Faith must be positively acted upon.¹⁰² Such faith is simply trusting God’s love; accepting that He knows what is best for our good; accepting His wisdom and strength in place of our ignorance; and, accepting His righteousness in the place of our own. Finally,

⁹⁵Ibid., 5:168.

⁹⁶Ellen G. White, MS 1, 1898, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁹⁷Ellen G. White, MS 75, 1893, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁹⁸Ellen G. White, “Soldiers for Christ—Part 1,” *YI*, July 8, 1897, 210.

⁹⁹Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 175.

¹⁰⁰Ellen G. White, *Education*, 255.

¹⁰¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:258.

¹⁰²Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:242, 243.

faith “acknowledges [God’s] ownership and accepts its blessing.”¹⁰³

Faith’s fruits are humility, meekness and obedience.¹⁰⁴ Man is capable of reflecting the divine character only through the exercise of faith. This is the result of God’s Word being faithfully studied and applied to the life and accessing Christ’s power to transform character and produce His works in us.¹⁰⁵ Faith must be cultivated and shuns doubt¹⁰⁶ by rising beyond itself.¹⁰⁷ Faith’s work begins with laying hold of Christ, which enables one to overcome. “We are to believe that we are chosen of God, to be saved by the exercise of faith, through the grace of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁸

Saving faith is not casual, nor merely a consent of the intellect, but is belief rooted in the heart, embracing Christ as personal Savior. Faith is assured of Christ’s salvation. White says faith leads its possessor “to place all the affections . . . upon Christ; his understanding is under the control of the Holy Spirit, and his character is molded after the divine likeness.” Such faith works by love and leads those who have it to “behold the beauty of Christ, and to become assimilated to the divine character.”¹⁰⁹ Faith will mold

¹⁰³Ellen G. White, *Education*, 253.

¹⁰⁴Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:438.

¹⁰⁵Ellen G. White, MS 6, 1889, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁰⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:302.

¹⁰⁷Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Hickox, 13 October 1896, Letter 30, 1896, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁰⁸Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Grainger, 24 October 1892, Letter 7, 1892; idem, MS 16, 1890, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁰⁹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:391.

the life, but one rejects faith when one fails to embrace the truth it presents. At this point light is rejected and darkness is chosen.¹¹⁰

Faith's counterfeit is presumption. While White believes both presumption and faith lay hold of God's promises, presumption does so to excuse transgression. Genuine faith does not claim Heaven's favor without complying with the conditions on which mercy is to be granted, for its foundation is in the promises and provisions of Scripture.¹¹¹

In summary, White believes faith is the conduit of grace and the means by which Christ's merits are appropriated. Faith earns nothing, rests upon Scripture, is rooted in the heart, and must be acted upon. Faith's results are humility, meekness, and obedience; enabling man to overcome. Under the Holy Spirit's control, faith molds human character after the divine likeness.

Justification

In Arminian thought, justification is God's gracious and just act as judge, absolving man from his sins on Christ's account.¹¹² A synonym for it is pardon, the "forgiveness of all our sins; and, what is necessarily implied therein, our acceptance with God." The meritorious cause is Christ's blood and righteousness. Its immediate effects are the peace of God and joy.¹¹³ Such forgiveness is offered to all (1 John 2:2; John 1:29;

¹¹⁰Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 597-598.

¹¹¹Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 126.

¹¹²Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 2:116.

¹¹³Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 6:44-45.

6:51).¹¹⁴ This truth is able to be understood by all. None can ransom himself or his neighbor. In that man's life is forfeited for his transgressions, he is offered pardon because of his belief in the sufficient sacrifice of Christ through His shed blood as an oblation for sin.¹¹⁵

To a point, Ellen White agrees with the Reformed position that a sinner is capable of finding God only if sought and found by Christ, but she differs to the extent that Christ searches for all the lost. "No man of himself can repent, and make himself worthy of the blessing of justification." Once found, Christ draws us by His grace, power, and virtue. Thus repentance and justification are the unmerited gifts of God.¹¹⁶ However, the "sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins, which have caused the sufferings of God's dear Son."¹¹⁷

However, calling and justification are not the same. Calling is the work of the Holy Spirit on the human heart, "convicting of sin, and inviting to repentance."¹¹⁸ White cautions against attempting to be too explicit in trying to understand justification by faith as this neither helps nor deters its reality.¹¹⁹ Repentance precedes forgiveness.¹²⁰ The sinner must come to Christ, believe that His word is true, believe the promise, and ask.

¹¹⁴Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 1:316.

¹¹⁵Clark, *Christian Theology*, 138-139.

¹¹⁶Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:390-391.

¹¹⁷Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 27.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 1:389.

¹¹⁹Ellen G. White, "Christ Our Righteousness," *MR*, 9:300.

¹²⁰Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:390.

The Lord gives the Holy Spirit to lead to repentance and faith in Christ. Prayer is not in vain when sincere. Prayer, watchfulness, and a sincere desire to obey the commandments of God follow, and old habits and associations that distract from God will be renounced.¹²¹

White defines justification as what happens when a penitent sinner is contrite and recognizes Christ's death in his behalf. He then accepts this "atonement as his only hope in this life and the future life." His sins are then pardoned. This is justification by faith. She then adds that "every believing soul is to conform his will entirely to God's, and keep in a state of repentance and contrition, exercising faith in the atoning merits of the Redeemer, and advancing from strength to strength, from glory to glory."¹²² Pardon and justification are one. The rebel becomes a loyal subject of Christ who receives him by adoption. Sins are forgiven and "borne by his Substitute and Surety."¹²³ White agrees with the Wesleyan view that justification is both an act of forgiveness as well as a forensic act,¹²⁴ for, as explained by Alberto Timm, the aim of Christ's incarnation was to change men from sin to holiness.¹²⁵ In Christ's sacrifice, the demands of justice are fully met.¹²⁶ The pardoned sinner is treated as though he had never sinned and received into divine favor on the basis of the merits of Christ's righteousness. The repentant's own

¹²¹Ibid., 1:393.

¹²²Ellen G. White, "This Is Justification by Faith" [Rom 5:1], *SDABC*, 6:1070-1071.

¹²³Ellen G. White, "Accepted in Christ," *ST*, July 4, 1892, 497.

¹²⁴John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1894), 2:78-79.

¹²⁵Alberto R. Timm, "A Short Analysis of the Book *Steps to Christ* in the Light of John Wesley's Theology" (Term paper, Andrews University, 1991), 4.

¹²⁶Ellen G. White, "Christ Our Righteousness," *MR*, 9:301.

works play no role in justification. “He can be delivered from the guilt of sin, from the condemnation of the law, from the penalty of transgression, only by virtue of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. Faith is the only condition upon which justification can be obtained, and faith includes not only belief but trust.”¹²⁷

This great work on the sinner’s behalf is the imputation to the believer of Christ’s righteousness. The sinner is pronounced righteous in that his sins have been transferred to Christ, the sinner’s representative, substitute, and surety (2 Cor 5:21). In justification, White claims that “Christ made satisfaction for the guilt of the whole world, and all who will come to God in faith, will receive the righteousness of Christ” (1 Pet 2:24). She adds: “Our sin has been expiated, put away, cast into the depths of the sea. Through repentance and faith we are rid of sin, and look unto the Lord our righteousness.”¹²⁸

White also defines justification as opposite to condemnation. In justification, mercy is served without negating justice for Christ, which has become the propitiation for man’s sins and through the exercise of faith in Christ; the “guilty transgressor is brought into favor with God and into the strong hope of life eternal.”¹²⁹ Yet the individual can attain rest only when self-justification is rejected and self is totally surrendered to Christ.¹³⁰

Though man is under the condemnation of the law, Christ provides the repentant the merits of His own righteousness by His obedience. In order to receive this, the sinner

¹²⁷Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:389.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 1:392.

¹²⁹Ellen G. White, “Christ Our Righteousness,” *MR*, 9:302.

¹³⁰Ellen G. White, “Come Unto Me . . . and I Will Give You Rest,” *RH*, April 25, 1899, 257.

must “know what that repentance is which works a radical change of mind and spirit and action. Transformation must begin in the heart, and manifest its power through every faculty of the being; but man is not capable of originating such a repentance as this, and can experience it alone through Christ.” The truth must be received, and God’s renovating power must work on the soul. Christ is the source of penitence. Only the penitent are pardoned and receive Christ’s righteousness (Isa 61:10).¹³¹

In summary, White states that repentance precedes forgiveness. The sinner accepts Christ’s atonement and receives pardon. Faith and rejection of self-justification are justification’s conditions. Repentance produces radical change of mind and spirit.

Sanctification

Christ’s Sermon on the Mount describes true sanctification, for He presents what His followers should be,¹³² and is glorified when man reflects His image. Ellen White says Christ is the author of man’s being and redemption, and all who enter heaven will develop characters counterpart to His. Christ is thus “cleaving out a people from the world and purifying them unto Himself.” All that nurtures pride must be discarded in favor of reflecting His image, that by His grace we may be transformed into new creatures.¹³³ Forming a Christlike character is man’s most vital work,¹³⁴ and the reason

¹³¹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:393.

¹³²Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister S. N. Haskell, 27 September 1902, Letter 153, 1902, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹³³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:52.

¹³⁴Ellen G. White to G. I. Butler, 1 March 1886, Letter 14, 1886, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

God permits the “furnace fires to kindle upon” His own, that He may mold men “through fiery trials into the image of Christ.” His merits and virtues enable this transformation.¹³⁵ Christlikeness will be seen only in those “assimilated to the divine image,” and God “demands the use of every entrusted capability” of man to attain it.¹³⁶ Christlikeness is compassion, sympathy, tenderness, and consideration of others.¹³⁷ While on earth, Jesus retained His perfection of character. It is such character that constitutes one’s fitness to see God. It is only in Christ that one may become a partaker of His character. This occurs as humanity is united with divinity, in that by beholding we become changed.¹³⁸ Both John Wesley and Ellen White understood this process to be gradual and progressive.¹³⁹

Ellen G. White argues that Paul “did not exhort his brethren to aim at a standard which it was impossible for them to reach; he did not pray that they might have blessings which it was not the will of God to give. He knew that all who would be fitted to meet Christ in peace must possess a pure and holy character.”¹⁴⁰ Yet a tension does exist, for she also recognizes a difference between a striving to be like Christ in character and the human ability to attain such perfection. For she writes that “so long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sin to overcome; so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁵Ellen G. White, “The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven,” *ST*, August 21, 1893, 645-646.

¹³⁶Ellen G. White, MS 6, 1895, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹³⁷Ellen G. White, MS 7, 1891, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹³⁸Ellen G. White, “Restoration of the Image of God,” *MR*, 9:375.

¹³⁹Timm, “A Short Analysis of the Book *Steps to Christ* in the Light of John Wesley’s Theology,” 4-5.

¹⁴⁰Ellen G. White, *Sanctified Life*, 26.

¹⁴¹Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 560-561.

In his work on White's understanding of the humanity of Christ, Woodrow Whidden notes that any and all obedience and penitence rests on the righteousness of Christ, for "with our defiled and corrupt channels of humanity, [we] need the constant intercession of Jesus" Christ.¹⁴² Robert W. Olson claims that it is "impossible for man in his own unaided strength to overcome the natural propensities to evil."¹⁴³ However, God does promise us a new heart. Olson cites Ellen G. White with the following: "It was impossible for the sinner to keep the law of God, which was holy, just, and good; but this impossibility was removed by the impartation of the righteousness of Christ to the repenting, believing soul."¹⁴⁴ Thus our "sufficiency is found only in the incarnation and death of the Son of God."¹⁴⁵

White says this is religion of the biblical standard.¹⁴⁶ Faith in Christ and the faithful study of Scripture received into the life provide spiritual wisdom and life needed for transformation.¹⁴⁷ Those focusing on others' imperfections are transformed into the image of those they condemn, rather than into God's. In beholding Christ, studying His life and character, we become like Him and the Holy Spirit will possess both mind and character until Christ is fully emulated (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:9). Sanctification is "God's object in all His dealings with us" (1 Thess 4:3) for Christ gave Himself to us. By faith

¹⁴²Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on the Humanity of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1997), 71-72.

¹⁴³Olson, *The Humanity of Christ*, 12-13.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁵*Questions on Doctrines*, annotated ed., ed. George R. Knight (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 544.

¹⁴⁶Ellen G. White, MS 77, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁴⁷Ellen G. White to Workers in Southern California, 3 October 1907, Letter 340, 1907, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

man becomes complete in Him. This is the meaning of eating His flesh and drinking His blood.¹⁴⁸ “Truth is full of godlike richness.” Partakers of the divine nature will hold firm to truth, for it will “hold the believer.”¹⁴⁹ True education strengthens character, worldly ambition is removed, fortifying the mind against evil. All motives and desires are brought into conformity to the principles of right. “As the perfection of His character is dwelt upon, the mind is renewed, and the soul is re-created in the image of God.”¹⁵⁰

Sanctification reveals Christ as able to save to the utmost.¹⁵¹ White posits that communion with God opens up when the “knowledge of the perfection of the divine character [is] manifested to us in Jesus Christ.” We become partakers of His nature by laying hold of His promises.¹⁵² By daily lessons learned in the “school of Christ,” by “manifesting His excellency of character, by adding grace to grace,” we become transformed into His image, becoming heavenward bound and “complete” in Him.¹⁵³ “The whole heart's purpose must be constantly refined, elevated, ennobled, [and] sanctified,” or God’s work will be marred and the soul ruined.¹⁵⁴ The results are seen in the outward life as the divine standard is now met in preparation for a better world.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister S. N. Haskell, 27 September 1902, Letter 153, 1902, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁴⁹Ellen G. White, MS 84, 1905, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁵⁰Ellen G. White, *Education*, 18.

¹⁵¹Ellen G. White, MS 10, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁵²Ellen G. White, “Restoration of the Image of God,” *MR*, 9:371.

¹⁵³Ellen G. White to Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, 14 June 1895, Letter 43, 1895, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁵⁴Ellen G. White to W. O. Palmer, 26 June, 1902, Letter 163, 1902, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁵⁵Ellen G. White, “Restoration of the Image of God,” *MR*, 9:372.

Transformation into the similitude of Christ's character, that we might have His purity and perfection, is Heaven's goal. White holds that in "the work of regeneration, the original loveliness begins to be restored. Attributes of the character of Christ are imparted to the soul, and the image of the divine begins to shine forth" (Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17, 19, 21; 6:1; Rom 8:14, 9).¹⁵⁶

White recognizes that human nature will continue to be such, but man is to be "elevated and ennobled by union with the divine nature."¹⁵⁷ Selfishness fills one with self-love, which is blind to the perfection God requires and in turn destroys His moral image in man. Christ demands perfection (Matt 5:48), which should be understood as seeking the good of others.¹⁵⁸ "Godliness is to be an ornament to the life, as well as the saving salt of character." Those who are objectionable are so because "the truth has not been permitted to sanctify their unholy dispositions. This is evident in faultfinding and the individual's belief that he has authority to measure character and "lord it over God's heritage." Such individuals lack divine love.¹⁵⁹

Christ is central to this process of sanctification for He imputes righteousness to us. White says Christ also "works against the power of sin" by His ministry of grace

¹⁵⁶Ellen G. White, "The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven," *ST*, August 21, 1893, 645-646.

¹⁵⁷Ellen G. White to J. E. White and Emma White, 2 March 1903, Letter 38, 1903, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁵⁸Ellen G. White, MS 78, 1901, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁵⁹Ellen G. White, "The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven," *ST*, August 21, 1893, 645.

(Rom 5:1, 2).¹⁶⁰ It is also Christ (who through the Holy Spirit) does the reshaping of human character after the divine, and thus makes “it beautiful with His own glory.”¹⁶¹

Holiness

God reproves and corrects those who profess to uphold His law. He points out sin and lays it open as sin must be separated from the righteous so they “may perfect holiness,” die to self, and one day be translated to heaven. Ellen White posits that God does not accept defect in character. Those not striving for holiness do not have an experiential knowledge of God. Christ provides ample strength and grace to those who strive after character perfection (holiness). All may overcome by abiding in Christ¹⁶² as self is put aside and the heart is worked by the Holy Spirit. At this point the “soul lies perfectly passive.” Transformation can occur only in those who set aside faultfinding, murmuring, accusation, wrathful speaking, worry, and perplexity.¹⁶³ Those who seek such perfection by “exercising their faculties in good works” will “reap that which they have sown” in the world to come. “The self-denial . . . required in the cultivation of the heart in doing the works of Christ will be infinitely overbalanced by the rich reward of the eternal weight of glory, the joys of the life which measure with the life of God.”¹⁶⁴ As truth finds access to the heart, it begins to refine the character. The proud become meek and humble. Originally created in God’s image and likeness, God’s moral image in man

¹⁶⁰Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:394.

¹⁶¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 8:267.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 2:266, 453-454.

¹⁶³Ellen G. White, “Demonic Influences,” *MR*, 9:324.

¹⁶⁴Ellen G. White, “Address and Appeal, Setting Forth the Importance of Missionary Work (Concluded),” *RH*, January 2, 1878, par. 5.

was almost obliterated. However, Jesus' life on earth provided humanity with an example; "His beautiful and spotless character is before man as an example for him to imitate." White claims that in this imitation we stand before God by faith and living and keeping God's laws through Christ.¹⁶⁵

No individual is so degraded by sin that they cannot find Christ, for strength and grace are provided through Christ. He seeks to remove mankind's defiled garments and reclothe humanity in the robes of His righteousness. "Their branches will not wither nor be fruitless. If they abide in Him, they can draw sap and nourishment from Him, be imbued with His Spirit, walk even as He walked, overcome as He overcame, and be exalted to His own right hand."¹⁶⁶

Obedience

White posits that when the will is surrendered to God, genuine faith will be visible in our actions (good works), which are the fruits of faith. Man's cooperation with God enables the Holy Spirit to bring harmony between "the purpose of the heart and the practice of the life." All sin must be renounced, and one "must have a progressive experience by continually doing the works of Christ." In this way one may retain his justification. Man is not justified by faith "when his works do not correspond to his profession" (Jas 2:22, 24; Rom 3:20-31; 4:3).¹⁶⁷ Justification is provided without human merit or belief that one can offer God anything. It comes through Christ's redemption. However, having been justified by Christ's merits, one is not at liberty to work

¹⁶⁵Ellen G. White, MS 6a, 1886, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁶⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:453-454.

¹⁶⁷Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:397.

unrighteousness, for faith bears a harvest of fruit. In addition, the countenance reflects the Christian experience, and “men take knowledge of them that they have been with Jesus and learned of Him. Christ and the believer become one, and His beauty of character is revealed in those who are vitally connected with the Source of power and love. Christ is the great depositary of justifying righteousness and sanctifying grace.”¹⁶⁸

In summary, White identifies sanctification as the transformation of the human character back into being a counterpart of God’s character. Self-love and pride are discarded. Such a character is made of the fruits of the Spirit. The stimulant for transformation is the faithful study of Scripture applied to the life, the claiming of God’s promises, and the possession by the Holy Spirit of the life (for when truth gains access to the heart, it commences its refining process upon the character). This renewal recreates man in the image of God and seeks the good of others. In this way the human character is reshaped after the divine character.

Role of the Holy Spirit

Believers cannot put off to the future that which must be accomplished in them. One is first to accept Christ’s peace by the forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Christ. Through Him, man must make “an end of the controlling power of sin in the heart,” and ask that his life and character “testify to the genuine character of the grace of Christ. To those that ask Him, Jesus imparts the Holy Spirit.” Ellen White holds that through the Spirit’s “sanctification of truth” the “believer becomes fitted for the courts of heaven; for Christ works within us, and His righteousness is upon us. Without this no

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 1:398.

soul will be entitled to heaven. We would not enjoy heaven unless qualified for its holy atmosphere by the influence of the Spirit and the righteousness of Christ.” All must meet the law’s requirements (Luke 10:27), which is achieved when by faith man grasps Christ’s righteousness. “By beholding Jesus we receive a living, expanding principle in the heart, and the Holy Spirit carries on the work,” and the believer advances in grace, strength, and character. He conforms to the image of Christ, until in spiritual growth he attains unto the measure of the full stature in Christ Jesus.”¹⁶⁹

The Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14) by “revealing to the world the riches of His grace. The image of God is to be reproduced in humanity. The honor of God . . . is involved in the perfection of the character of His people.”¹⁷⁰ This work is impossible for oneself.¹⁷¹ As Comforter, He changes human character “into the image of Christ.” Once accomplished, mankind will “reflect, as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord.”¹⁷² He “reveals Christ to the mind, and faith takes.” He “conforms man to this image; for Christ is the model upon which the Spirit works.” By the ministry of His Word, His providences, and His inward working, “God stamps the likeness of Christ upon the soul.”¹⁷³ White says that, “imperceptibly to ourselves, we are changed day by day from our ways and will into the ways and will of Christ, into the loveliness of His character. Thus we grow up into Christ, and unconsciously reflect His image.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 1:394-395.

¹⁷⁰Ellen G. White, “The Promise of the Spirit,” *RH*, May 19, 1904, 7.

¹⁷¹Ellen G. White, “Changed into His Image,” *RH*, December 5, 1912, 3-4.

¹⁷²“Too Near the Lowlands of Earth” [2 Cor 3:18], *SDABC*, 6:1097.

¹⁷³Ellen G. White, MS 10, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁷⁴Ellen G. White, “Changed into His Image,” *RH*, December 5, 1912, 3-4.

The impact of the Holy Spirit upon the life is evident in every act, for the person's life becomes transformed. The fruit of the Spirit replaces the works of the flesh. Thus the child of God is blessed as self is surrendered to God. The result is that the individual is recreated in the image of God.¹⁷⁵

The ethical activity of the Holy Spirit is threefold. First, to convict man of his need for Christ and the forgiveness of sins (Wesley calls this the conviction that we are sons and daughters of God). Second, bring man into harmony with God's laws. Third, restore man to the image of God, which in agreement with Wesley, is to reflect Christ's character as a mirror reflects another. All three prepare one for eternity. White's view of the ethical activity of the Holy Spirit is in keeping with John Wesley's four steps of the Comforter's ministry. First, He testifies that we are children of God, loved and reconciled to the Father by Christ, who blotted out all our sins.¹⁷⁶ Second, He leads, directs, and governs our conversations (Rom 8:14).¹⁷⁷ Third, one cannot be born of the Spirit without His fruit (also evident by being felt in the soul through the presence of love, joy, peace, and its more distant effects).¹⁷⁸ Lastly, is the sealing of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷⁹

In summary, White identifies the ministry of the Holy Spirit as fitting the believer for heaven by instilling the righteousness of Christ. Man conforms to the character of Christ as the image of God is reproduced in the life. This is perfection of character. The

¹⁷⁵Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 173.

¹⁷⁶Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 5:115.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 9:165-166.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 1:215.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 7:491.

result is that man is convicted of sin, brought into harmony with God's laws, and results in him reflecting the character of Christ.

Role of Conscience

The Greek word for conscience is *suneidēseōs*, which implies “the knowledge of two or more things together,” combining words and actions with their merits and demerits. John Wesley states that it is a supernatural gift of God. For God “has shown you, O man, what is good,” and the Spirit has given us an inward check when we walk contrary to the light God has given. A good conscience is a divine “consciousness of walking in all things according to the written word of God.” To continue, it must have the ongoing influence of the Holy Spirit and agreement with all the commandments of God.¹⁸⁰ However, the conscience is a delicate instrument of God that when separated from the teachings of Holy Scripture becomes unreliable. Deliberate sin lays waste the conscience, making it incapable of receiving self-condemnation.¹⁸¹

In keeping with Arminian theology, Ellen White identifies conscience as “the voice of God, heard amid the conflict of human passions.” The Holy Spirit is grieved when resisted.¹⁸² Conscience is the mind's inner light and the soul depends on it for spiritual health. Scripture is its “eyesalve” (Rev 3:18), convicting of sin and making it smart, which is necessary for healing.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰Wesley, *The Writings of John Wesley*, 7:187.

¹⁸¹Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, 2:502.

¹⁸²Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:120.

¹⁸³“Correct Views for the Conscience” [Rev 3:18], *SDABC*, 7:965.

Consequent to justification, White says the conscience is “purged from dead works” and “placed where it can receive the blessings of sanctification.”¹⁸⁴ Rather than creating new faculties, the Holy Spirit brings about radical change in their employment. Where once the sensibilities were dormant, the conscience is aroused and renewed.¹⁸⁵

Amiable dispositions should be cultivated and under the conscience’s control. White states that truth works like leaven until one is brought into conformity to its principles, opening the heart to its fruits, which are acts of compassion.¹⁸⁶ In order to have a good conscience character must be transformed. This is achieved by: (1) the avoidance of offending God and man; (2) dying self; and, (3) Christ possessing the “soul temple.”¹⁸⁷ As man follows Christ his path grows clearer and brighter. When the right choices are made the conscience is renewed and re-sensitized.¹⁸⁸ Subjected to the Holy Spirit’s control conscience may be purified, illuminated, and sanctified. This is the consequence of: (1) free choice; (2) cessation of evil; and, (3) a learning to do well.¹⁸⁹ As Christ takes control the mental faculties are enlarged and conscience falls under divine guidance.¹⁹⁰

White understands the conscience to be temperamental. The “removal of one

¹⁸⁴“Holiness Within the Reach of All” [1 Thess 4:3], *SDABC*, 7:908.

¹⁸⁵Ellen G. White to G. James, 17 March 1899, Letter 44, 1899, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁸⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 4:59.

¹⁸⁷Ellen G. White to Sands Lane, 12 April, 1903, Letter 162, 1903, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁸⁸Ellen G. White to Walter Harper, 19 January, 1904, Letter 45, 1904, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁸⁹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:564.

¹⁹⁰Ellen G. White, MS 18, 1901, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

safeguard from the conscience, the failure to do the very thing that the Lord has marked out, one step in the path of wrong principle, often leads to an entire change of the life and action.”¹⁹¹ There are good and bad consciences. Bad ones go to extremes making life a burden. White holds that one strong-willed radical fanatic who oppresses the conscience of the conscientious will do great harm. “The church needs to be purified from all such influences.”¹⁹² Perceptions are unreliable; not all consciences are inspired alike. Some are seared, warped, biased, or dead, due to preconceived opinions; thus conscience must never replace God’s Word. One may be conscientiously wrong, believing oneself to be doing God’s service.¹⁹³ When guided by unsubdued human perceptions, not softened by Christ’s grace, the mind is diseased. Things are not viewed clearly. The imagination is distorted and the mind sees things in a distorted light.¹⁹⁴ Conscience is no indication of standing with God, for some sin without its condemnation. It is only trustworthy under the influence of divine grace, for Satan manipulates the unenlightened conscience, deluding those who have not made Scripture their counselor.¹⁹⁵

By neglect of truth in favor of personal gain, the soul is sold and one’s conscience becomes unreliable. In refusing light, one “partakes of the fruit of disobedience.”¹⁹⁶ Satan

¹⁹¹Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Prescott, 8 August 1898, Letter 71, 1898, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁹²Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:319.

¹⁹³Ellen G. White to Howard Miller and Madison Miller, 23 July 1889, Letter 4, 1889, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁹⁴Ellen G. White to Walter Harper, 19 January 1904, Letter 45, 1904, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁹⁵Ellen G. White, “Obedience the Fruit of Union with Christ—No. 2,” *RH*, September 3, 1901, 567-568.

¹⁹⁶Ellen G. White, MS 27, 1900, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

attempts to drown the conscience through infatuation for schemes and pleasure, and that which is perishable.¹⁹⁷ To the extent it is violated, conscience is weakened.¹⁹⁸ Conscience becomes Satan's battlefield,¹⁹⁹ and turns tyrannical.²⁰⁰ Each violation opens the way for the next, "until the heart of unbelief becomes hardened, and the conscience loses its sensitiveness."²⁰¹ White identifies this process as a "downward course" hastening Satan's victims to the loss of tenderness of conscience.²⁰²

It is impossible to have heaven's approval when the command to love others as ourselves is ignored.²⁰³ Conscience must be protected, for when violated, the tongue utters guile.²⁰⁴ Conscience is violated and stifled by five actions. First, when pride and independence get in a person's way. The second is when one's lost condition goes unrecognized.²⁰⁵ Third, when falsehood and misrepresentation are indulged.²⁰⁶ Fourth, when we deal unjustly with others, and finally, when we fail to recognize God's

¹⁹⁷Ellen G. White, MS 161, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁹⁸Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:90, 91.

¹⁹⁹Ellen G. White to the Church at St. Claire, Nevada, 13 March 1885, Letter 14, 1885, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

²⁰⁰Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Prescott, 1 September 1896, Letter 88, 1896, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

²⁰¹Ellen G. White, MS 9, 1903, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

²⁰²Ellen G. White, *Temperance* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1949), 274.

²⁰³Ellen G. White, "The Christian Rule in Deal," *ST*, February 7, 1884, 81.

²⁰⁴Ellen G. White, "Christian Leadership," *MR*, 7:133.

²⁰⁵Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:559-560.

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 2:562.

lordship.²⁰⁷ Under abuse the conscience becomes hardened.²⁰⁸

In summary, White argues that God speaks through the conscience. Character must be transformed to have a good conscience. It is then that the conscience falls under divine guidance. Yet the conscience is always temperamental and can go to extremes or become numbed. Conscience is never an indication of one's standing with God and is only trustworthy under divine grace. If violated, conscience is weakened and may become hardened.

Having perused the theological presuppositions that undergird Ellen White's understanding of the unpardonable sin, this dissertation will take a brief look at her understanding of sin itself. This overview will lead us into our study of her theology of the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Sin

Sin's origin is inexplicable and without reason. Sin originated in Lucifer in a "perfect universe." White sees a progression: First came Lucifer's self-seeking. Next, his deception of the angels through antagonism toward their Creator, followed by the deception of mankind by creating doubt against God's Word. This led to distrust for God's goodness. God is not responsible for sin's origin or existence, for it is "an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it, is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause for its existence be shown, it would cease to be sin." Its only satisfactory definition is as the "transgression of the law"

²⁰⁷Ellen G. White, "The Duty of Paying Tithes and Offerings," *RH*, December 17, 1889, 785.

²⁰⁸Ellen G. White to Walter Harper, 19 January 1904, Letter 45, 1904, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

(1 John 3:4). Sin is “the outworking of a principle at war with the great law of love which is the foundation of the divine government,”²⁰⁹ and once the final execution of judgment has occurred, it will be seen that no cause for sin ever existed.²¹⁰

In summarizing Ellen White’s theology of sin, Jiri Moskala recognizes that sin is not only an act, but a state of being. Sin’s essence is whatever is at war with God’s great law of love and is in contradiction to His character. “Sin is not only an act, a wrongdoing, but also a principle in the selfish *nature* of humanity, an *inclination* to sin.”²¹¹

While rejecting the Roman Catholic concept of venial and mortal sins, Ellen White claims that not all sins are equal in magnitude. What might be viewed by humanity as insignificant, is not viewed that way by God. For pride, selfishness, and covetousness too often go unrebuked. These sins “are especially offensive to God; for they are contrary to the benevolence of His character, to that unselfish love which is the very atmosphere of the unfallen universe.” The one guilty of “grosser sins” may experience “shame and poverty and his need of the grace of Christ; but pride feels no need, and so it closes the heart against Christ and the infinite blessings He came to give.”²¹²

Sin in its most nearly helpless and incurable state is pride of opinion and self-conceit. This prevents all growth.²¹³ One cannot truly recognize degrees of sin, for many people minimize sin by following their own wishes, desires, and inclinations. This leads

²⁰⁹Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 493.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, 503.

²¹¹Jiri Moskala, “Sin,” *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2013), 1165.

²¹²Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 30.

²¹³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 7:199-200.

individuals to regard sin as no longer offensive or terrible in God's sight. Though it may appear insignificant by blunted conscience, sin is so grievous "in the sight of God that nothing but the blood of [Christ] could wash it away. This fact places the true estimate upon sin." White adds that "in proportion to the excellence of God is the heinous character of sin."²¹⁴ Sufficient light is available for one to recognize error and reject such error in favor of perfecting "holiness in the fear of the Lord." One sin is just as grievous as another. Those who hide their sins are incapable of spiritual advance, and their lives will become increasingly dark "until the light of heaven will be entirely withdrawn."²¹⁵

In summary, White recognizes sin to be a mysterious intruder. Sin is the transgression of the law and the outworking of a principle against love and most difficult to cure when accompanied by pride. To excuse sin is to defend it, for all sins are of the same magnitude and will ultimately shut the sinner off from God unless repented of.

Having surveyed her theological presuppositions that impact on her understanding of the unpardonable sin, and having examined how she views sin in general, I will now address her concept of the unpardonable sin.

The Unpardonable Sin

Gottfried Oosterwal wrote two articles on the unpardonable sin²¹⁶ in which he addressed several arguments made by Ellen G. White. In his first article he argues that (1) "no one need look upon the sin against the Holy Spirit as something mysterious and

²¹⁴Ellen G. White to J. E. White, 10 November 1879, Letter 29, 1879, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

²¹⁵Ellen G. White, "The Exalted Character of the Christian Profession," *RH*, May 5, 1885, 273.

²¹⁶Gottfried Oosterwal, "The Unpardonable Sin (Parts I and II)," *Ministry*, April 1968, 10-12; May 1968, 30-32.

indefinable;” (2) that the sin is related to false accusations against Christ in full knowledge of counter evidence; and (3) that it is persistent by its very nature.²¹⁷ In his second article, Oosterwal states that in the synoptic Gospels “it is especially the enemies of Christ and the not-yet converted who are in danger of committing the unpardonable sin. A number of periscopes in the New Testament seem to indicate that professed Christians should also be warned of that eternal sin.” He then identifies several other elements to the sin that Ellen White addresses. “Spiritual indolence is a sign that people are in danger of falling away from the faith.” Then there is the refusal to grow in the Spirit as well as the spirit of spiritual independence, and persistent hostility.²¹⁸

Ellen White’s understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit includes these same points, but is more extensive in scope. She adds the following: First, God gives sufficient evidence so all may choose the right or the wrong. Second, those who end up committing the unpardonable sin continue to reject truth until they become blinded to God. Third, these persons attribute God’s work to human or satanic agencies. Fourth, His representatives come under false accusation. White defines the sin as that by which “man’s heart is effectually hardened against the influence of divine grace,” for it is “through the agency of the Holy Spirit that God communicates with man; and those who deliberately reject this agency as satanic, have cut off the channel of communication between the soul and Heaven.” Moreover, she contends that because the Holy Spirit works to reprove and convict the sinner, if that work “is finally rejected, there is no more that God can do for the soul. The last resource of divine mercy has been employed.” The

²¹⁷Oosterwal, “The Unpardonable Sin (Part I),” *Ministry*, April 1968, 10-12.

²¹⁸Oosterwal, “The Unpardonable Sin (Part II),” *Ministry*, May 1968, 30-32.

individual has “cut himself off from God, and sin has no remedy to cure itself.” There is no alternate means by which God can bring conviction to the transgressor. At this point there remains “no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries’ (Heb 10:26, 27).”²¹⁹

In summary, White claims that all have received sufficient light in order to choose either the right or the wrong. The unpardonable sin is the ultimate hardening of the heart to the point that the heart becomes completely unaffected by divine grace. As a result the agency of the Holy Spirit is seen as satanic.

Use of the Biblical Text

Wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. (Matt 12:31 KJV)

Ellen White states it is “by the Spirit that God works upon the heart; when men willfully reject the Spirit, and declare it to be from Satan, they cut off the channel by which God can communicate with them. When the Spirit is finally rejected, there is no more that God can do for the soul.”²²⁰ She issues four cautions: first, those who have received God’s truth and previously made full surrender to Him are in danger of this sin. Second, those who provide any and all resistance to the Holy Spirit, in the belief that repentance can be a future option, place themselves in a situation where they may move beyond the ability to repent. Third, once committed, the fallen are left to their own course

²¹⁹Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 404-405.

²²⁰Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 322-324.

to sink further into moral lethargy (see: Rom 1:21-26). Finally, once committed, forgiveness can never be obtained.²²¹

Biographical Examples

Though not a common approach used by theologians, Ellen White uses narrative to discuss individuals in the biblical record who committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. This approach is used by the biblical authors and, for millennia, theologians have developed solid systematics from the biblical narrative. In this light, the following individuals identified by Scripture will be examined by a review of her narratives:

Pharaoh, Korah, the Pharisees, Judas, and Ananias and Sapphira.

Pharaoh

In identifying the causes of Pharaoh's sin against the Holy Spirit, Ellen White makes nine observations. First, God did not bring Pharaoh into existence to rebel. Second, God overruled events to put him on the throne at that time²²² for a greater purpose. These purposes were to: (1) provide "perpetual monuments" of God's "providence and power" on Israel's behalf;²²³ (2) judge Egypt; and (3) bring Israel out of bondage.²²⁴

Third, Pharaoh had already forfeited God's mercy by his crimes.²²⁵ Though White

²²¹Ellen G. White, "Peril of Sinning against Light," *RH*, June 29, 1897, 401.

²²²Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 267-268.

²²³Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1969), 1:184-187).

²²⁴*Ibid.*, 1:196-197; Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 267-268.

²²⁵Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:196-197.

does not specifically identify these crimes, it is apparent they were committed against humanity, God's children (both corporately and individually). The unpardonable sin is not just rebellion against God, but can take the form of contending against His representatives. The cause is personal pride; for in the early stages of God's visitation, Pharaoh failed to realize "that he was not only contending against Moses and Aaron, but against . . . the maker of the heavens and of the earth." He was enraged "because he could not intimidate Moses, and make him tremble before his kingly authority."²²⁶

Fourth, God did not exercise supernatural power to harden Pharaoh's heart.²²⁷ White sees a progression toward Pharaoh hardening his own heart through the plague of flies.²²⁸ At that point, appeal and warning were ineffectual, for he had hardened his heart by persistent rebellion, in spite of his counselors recognizing the supernatural acts to be the finger of God.²²⁹ With the plague of boils (Exod 9:12), God is for the first time since Exod 7:3 identified as hardening Pharaoh's heart. Now, in spite of the irrefutable evidence, Pharaoh refused to be persuaded.²³⁰ Egyptians who "feared the word of the Lord" prepared for the coming hail, indicating that freedom of choice was still available. Though Pharaoh experienced remorse, it was ineffectual for three reasons: (1) it was motivated purely by the consequences of his sin; (2) he refused to accept accountability,

²²⁶Ibid., 1:197-198.

²²⁷Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 268.

²²⁸Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:187-188.

²²⁹Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 266-267.

²³⁰Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:190.

and blamed his counselors;²³¹ and, (3) his contempt for God was undiminished.²³² White argues that if Pharaoh had not hardened himself in rebellion against God, he would have been humbled by a sense of God's power.²³³

Fifth, God provided Pharaoh with "the most striking evidence of divine power."²³⁴ Though White cites Exod 7:3-5 in which God states that He will harden Pharaoh's heart and that he would be unresponsive to God's commands, the cause of the hardening is Pharaoh's refusal to receive Moses and Aaron, and every "punishment which the king rejected would bring the next chastisement more close and severe, until the proud heart of the king would be humbled, and he should acknowledge the Maker of the heavens and the earth as the living and all-powerful God."²³⁵

Sixth, Pharaoh stubbornly refused to respond to God's light.²³⁶ While his character was ripe for the commission of the unpardonable sin (in his disregard and mistreatment of his fellow man), he progressed further toward the sin against the Holy Spirit with his anger at the interest generated by the arrival of Moses and Aaron. This resulted in an extension of cruelty toward the down trodden (the Hebrew slaves). To this he added taunting. It is at this point God instigates His first action against the king.²³⁷

White posits that the witness of the Hebrews to their faith in the Creator and the

²³¹Ibid., 1:192-193.

²³²Ibid., 1:195-196.

²³³Ibid., 1:196-197.

²³⁴Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 268.

²³⁵Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:182-183.

²³⁶Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 268.

²³⁷Ibid., 257-258.

history of His interaction with their forefathers provided Pharaoh with the opportunity to get to know God. He responded with a further extension of cruelty, derision, and denial of God's power.²³⁸ Though Pharaoh would be master of his own destiny, the consequent judgments from God would serve a specific purpose in that prior to each plague, Moses described its nature and effects, that Pharaoh might save both himself and his people, if he chose. Moreover, the Egyptians would have an opportunity to see their vanity and the impotence of their gods. Finally, God would provide His people with an opportunity "to turn from their idolatry and render Him pure worship."²³⁹

Seventh, Pharaoh rejected every evidence of divine action, making him even more "determined in his rebellion." Eighth, the "seeds of rebellion that he sowed when he rejected the first miracle, produced their harvest." Ninth, as he continued to venture on his own course, going from one degree of stubbornness to another, his heart became increasingly hardened until the death of his first-born.²⁴⁰

The tenth plague was the culmination of Pharaoh's rejection of all God's attempts to win him, but the monarch chose defiance. He would not humble himself, for he was set on getting his own rebellious way. In addition, he disregarded God in spite of all evidence. The result was that "the Lord withdrew his Spirit. Removing his restraining power, he gave the king into the hands of the worst of all tyrants,—self."²⁴¹

White applies that which resulted in the unpardonable sin in Pharaoh's life to all.

²³⁸Ibid., 158-259.

²³⁹Ibid., 263.

²⁴⁰Ibid., 268.

²⁴¹Ellen G. White, "The Sin of Rejecting Light," *RH*, July 27, 1897, 465.

She states that God gives everyone an opportunity to

correct his errors before they become fixed in the character; but if one refuses to be corrected, divine power does not interpose to counteract the tendency of his own action. He finds it more easy to repeat the same course. He is hardening the heart against the influence of the Holy Spirit. A further rejection of light places him where a far stronger influence will be ineffectual to make an abiding impression.²⁴²

She takes her argument further by claiming that once an individual has yielded to temptation, each successive yield becomes easier until all resistance is gone and conviction is stifled. Each indulgence sown bears fruit. “God works no miracle to prevent the harvest,” and that those who are “quieting a guilty conscience with the thought that they can change a course of evil when they choose . . . take this course at their peril” until the life “of sinful indulgence, has so thoroughly molded the character that they cannot then receive the image of Jesus.”²⁴³

Four things are evident in Ellen White’s Pharaoh narratives. First, “God never compels a man to offend and be lost.” He neither strengthened nor confirmed Pharaoh in “his obstinacy,” rather, God “allowed the seeds of unbelief to produce their fruit; and the seed sown when the first miracle was rejected, produced a harvest of infidelity. God left the king to the inclinations of his own heart.”²⁴⁴ Second, pride lies at the heart of the unpardonable sin. Third, there is a progression to the sin during which the sinner has repeated opportunities to repent and be saved. Finally, pride results in a combination of expressions in which the sin is evident. With Pharaoh it began with (1) disregard for his fellow man, the Hebrew slaves. This led to (2) disregard for specific individuals

²⁴²Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 268-269.

²⁴³Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 268-269.

²⁴⁴Ellen G. White, “The Sin of Rejecting Light,” *RH*, July 27, 1897, 465.

appointed by God. This was followed by (3) a challenge to the authority and person of God and, (4) to a rejection of truth.

In summary, White claims God did not bring Pharaoh into existence to rebel. Prior to his interaction with Moses he had already forfeited God's mercy by his crimes, for the unpardonable sin is not necessarily confined to rebellion against God, but can take the form of contending against His representatives. Moreover, God did not exercise supernatural power to harden Pharaoh's heart. While Pharaoh exercised remorse it proved ineffectual in that it was motivated by consequence; was void of accountability; and included contempt for God. He stubbornly refused to respond to truth. Furthermore, before each plague, Pharaoh understood its nature and effects and had opportunity to save himself if he so chose, yet he persisted in rejecting every evidence of divine action.

Korah

Ellen White places her Korah narrative in a triple context of: (1) forgetting God's guidance; (2) an unwillingness to accept God's discipline; and (3) fostering rebellion against God's servants. These would eventually bear bitter fruit. Popular tumults paved the way for "a deep-laid conspiracy" to "overthrow the authority of the leaders appointed by God." Dissatisfied with his own position Korah coveted greater respect. This gave rise to jealousy, dissatisfaction, and hatred, which led to a covert opposition to Moses and Aaron. From there he sought sympathizers.²⁴⁵

Korah was fully cognizant of the truth and God's dealings with Israel. He had been witness to His power and greatness. His slide into the unpardonable sin began with a

²⁴⁵Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 395-396.

“slight temptation” which strengthened as he encouraged it, until he came under Satan’s control. This led him to venture “upon [his] work of disaffection,” encouraged by sympathizers until he “really believed [himself] to be actuated by zeal for God.” His direct challenge was against the authority of God’s servants, thus indirectly challenging God’s authority. Success with others increased his confidence and “confirmed him in his belief,” until he believed God was with him.²⁴⁶

Under divine guidance, Moses arranged a public test to enable Korah to accept God’s authority. Yet Korah accused Moses of feigning to act under divine guidance in order to establish his authority. Moses’ character was maligned. Due to his trust in God, Moses made no effort to vindicate himself. In spite of divine warning, Korah remained defiant, though he was “abandoned by those whom [he] had deceived, but [his] hardihood was unshaken.” He could have repented and avoided the unpardonable sin, for White says that when “Moses was entreating Israel to flee from the coming destruction, the divine judgment might even then have been stayed, if Korah . . . had repented and sought forgiveness.” Stubborn persistence sealed his doom.²⁴⁷

It “is hardly possible for men to offer greater insult to God than to despise and reject the instrumentalities He would use for their salvation.” God gave Korah time to repent and confess. Instead of recognizing the depth of his sin, he resisted Moses’ and Aaron’s God-ordained authority and persisted in hatred toward “the men of God’s appointment.”²⁴⁸ White holds that Korah’s rebellion is a microcosm of Satan’s for it was

²⁴⁶Ibid., 396-398.

²⁴⁷Ibid., 399-401.

²⁴⁸Ibid., 402.

empowered by pride and ambition. She identifies this “same spirit of envy and discontent,” for “position and honor,” as Satan’s strategy to “arouse the desire for self-exaltation and excite envy, distrust, and rebellion.” The consequence was that they rejected “God as their leader, by rejecting the men of God’s appointment. Yet while in their murmuring against Moses and Aaron they blasphemed God, they were so deluded as to think themselves righteous, and to regard those who had faithfully reproved their sins as actuated by Satan.” She argues that these same “evils” of cherished pride and ambition “open the door to envy” and a “striving for supremacy” today, resulting in the soul being “alienated from God, and unconsciously drawn into the ranks of Satan.”²⁴⁹ Like Korah and his companions, many “are strategizing and working so eagerly for self-exaltation, sympathy, and support that “they are ready to pervert the truth, falsifying and misrepresenting the Lord’s servants, and even charging them with the base and selfish motives that inspire their own hearts.” By persistent repetition of falsehood, and against all evidence, such come to believe their own untruths. “While endeavoring to destroy the confidence of the people in the men of God’s appointment, they really believe that they are . . . doing God service.”²⁵⁰

Throughout history, God’s servants have been confronted by the same spirit. It is

by sinful indulgence that men give Satan access to their minds, and they go from one stage of wickedness to another. The rejection of light darkens the mind and hardens the heart, so that it is easier for them to take the next step in sin and to reject still clearer light, until at last their habits of wrongdoing become fixed. Sin ceases to appear sinful to them.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹Ibid., 403.

²⁵⁰Ibid., 404.

²⁵¹Ibid.

The faithful preaching of the Word is the catalyst that incurs hatred. To soothe conscience, the jealous and disaffected “combine to sow discord in the church and weaken the hands of those who would build it up.” Every “advance made by those whom God has called to lead in His work has excited suspicion; every act has been misrepresented by the jealous and faultfinding.”²⁵² Korah’s sin is specifically relevant to the end of time. His sin is emulated when some raise “insurrection among the people of God.” Those who oppose the “plain testimony” of God’s correction through human agents become self-deceived. Self-indulgence battles against conviction and indecision weakens the individual. The sacred becomes perverted when self is not denied, and those disaffected rally to sow discord.²⁵³

It is self-evident from Korah’s life and actions that his unpardonable sin was rooted in pride and self-justification. The unpardonable sin found expression in several ways: (1) he persisted in sin against two human beings; (2) he rejected God’s truth; (3) he challenged the authority of God; and, (4) his rebellion decimated the children of God.

In summary, White identifies the seeds of Korah’s unpardonable sin to coveting greater respect. His covetousness was rooted in pride and self-justification. Empowered by pride and ambition he directly challenged the authority of God’s servants, until each step further into sin became easier to take than the one before.

²⁵²Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:308.

²⁵³*Ibid.*, 1:306-308.

Achan

Ellen White places Israel's self-confidence²⁵⁴ and Achan's personal covetousness at the root of his sin. She calls this one of the most common yet most lightly regarded sins. "While other offenses meet with detection and punishment, how rarely does the violation of the tenth commandment so much as call forth censure." This was a sin of "gradual development." First, Achan "cherished greed of gain." Second, greed became a habit. Finally, the habit "bound him in fetters" almost impossible to break. One sin led to the next until he had robbed God of His object lesson to Israel.²⁵⁵

Unlike Pharaoh and Korah, Achan's sin was secret. Yet like theirs, his sin was committed in defiance and direct disobedience to a command of God. White links Achan's sin to those of Judas, Ananias, Sapphira, and Satan, and marvels that God's children do not understand the sin's enormity and prevalence as one that leads to eternal separation from God. Achan was given repeated opportunities to repent. When he was finally confronted with his sin, he chose silence until he could no longer hide his guilt. Even then he viewed his gain as "goodly."²⁵⁶ When he finally did confess, it wasn't because he recognized his sin but it was rather an attempt to escape the consequences. "Achan would not have confessed had he not hoped by so doing to avert the consequences of his crime." He lacked genuine repentance for sin; contrition; change of

²⁵⁴Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 493.

²⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 496.

²⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 494-497.

purpose; and, abhorrence of evil. Confessions forced by “an awful sense of condemnation and a fearful looking for of judgment” cannot save anyone.²⁵⁷

In summary, White holds that the cause of Achan’s fall into the unpardonable sin was covetousness exercised in defiance. The progression of the sin was gradual and secret. His repentance was not genuine and was motivated only by his desire to benefit personally (another form of covetousness).

Pharisees

Ellen White connects use of the tongue and motives of the heart to what will condemn the guilty,²⁵⁸ stressing the role they play as an index of the character of the unpardonable sin.²⁵⁹ The Jewish leaders used their ability to speak, a gift of God, in an effort to discredit John the Baptist. By misusing this blessing, they brought judgment upon themselves.

The sin of these people who were supposed to be spiritual leaders is prevalent in the lives of those with unrenewed hearts today too. White cautions those who use their tongues against those who speak God’s words that their attack opposes Christ “in the person of his saints.” The talent of speech “is a great power for good when it is used aright, but it is just as great a power for evil when the words spoken are poisonous. If this talent is abused, out of the heart proceed evil things. The words are either a savor of life

²⁵⁷Ibid., 497-498.

²⁵⁸Ellen G. White, “Our Words—No. 1,” *RH*, January 18, 1898, 37.

²⁵⁹Ibid., 38; idem, MS 73, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

unto life or of death unto death.”²⁶⁰ The refusal of the Jewish leaders to accept John paved the way for their rejection of Christ.

Their next step toward the unpardonable sin was occasioned by Christ’s miracles. The Pharisees responded to them with contempt and accused Christ of casting out demons through demonic action. Their contempt was the result of “enmity and prejudice” which was “stirred into a fury of madness.” This progression led them to unite “in pouring forth their hatred.” Moreover, their loathing came from “the treasure-house of their hard, stubborn hearts,” which was the result of unbelief. Though Christ’s miracles were a manifestation of God’s power, they attributed them to satanic agencies. The agent of their sin was the tongue, the result was the unpardonable sin, for in stubbornness they “determined to close their eyes to all evidence.”²⁶¹ In spite of warning they “were quenching the last rays of light emanating from the throne of God to their prejudiced, benighted souls.”²⁶² White says Christ’s works of mercy, goodness, and tender sympathy had “contrasted too sharply with their pride, selfishness, and evil actions.”²⁶³ She ties Matt 12:31-32 to 12:33’s “a tree is known by its fruit.” In rejecting the evidence of Christ’s ministry they failed to produce the required fruit and their tongues were “exerting a deadly influence” and “poisoning the religious principles of the people by their deception, and teaching for doctrine the commandments of men.” Furthermore, they

²⁶⁰Ellen G. White, “Our Words—No. 1,” *RH*, January 18, 1898, 37-38.

²⁶¹*Ibid.*, 38.

²⁶²Ellen G. White, “The Mother and Brethren of Christ,” *ST*, October 1, 1896, 5.

²⁶³Ellen G. White, “Our Words—No. 1,” *RH*, January 18, 1898, 37.

“strove earnestly to exalt their manufactured precepts, traditions and man-made commandments, above the law of God.”²⁶⁴

The Pharisees fell for several reasons. First, they were exasperated by Christ’s ministry. Second, they gave room to prejudice. Third, they wanted to believe evil against Christ. Fourth, they were relentless in their pursuit against Him. Fifth, their hearts were closed to conviction. Sixth, they were filled with intense hatred; and, finally, “they were ever seeking to find some occasion to work out their bitterness and wrath” against Christ (Matt 9:10-13).²⁶⁵ White argues that their need to see evidence of the supernatural in Christ’s ministry resulted in accusations of demonic enabling, though they did not believe that to be the case. They did not allow themselves to be impacted by the truth or their hearts to be converted, resulting in blasphemy and the unpardonable sin.²⁶⁶ “By rejecting the light that was shining upon them, by refusing to examine the evidence to see whether the messages were from heaven, the Pharisees sinned against the Holy Ghost.” Turning “their faces from the light, they refused to listen, choosing, instead, to cultivate their unbelief. Thus the light which, if received, would have been to them a savor of life unto life, rejected, became a savor of death unto death,—death to spirituality.” They fell through self-deception and the rejection of Christ’s teaching in that it exposed their evil hearts, and reproved them of sin. Thus they chose darkness instead of light.²⁶⁷ The raising of Lazarus and their rejection of this miracle by Christ was the last test. They plotted to

²⁶⁴Ibid., 37-38.

²⁶⁵Ellen G. White, “The Teacher Sent From God,” *MR*, 16:91.

²⁶⁶Ibid., par. 4.

²⁶⁷Ellen G. White, “The Sin of Rejecting Light,” *RH*, July 27, 1897, 465.

kill Him rather than embrace the evidence. “So will men do when they separate themselves from God. When unbelief once takes possession of the mind, the heart is hardened, and no power can soften it.”²⁶⁸

Persistence in rejection of Christ brought them to a place where they believed that by His crucifixion they would be “doing God a service,” thus falling into Korah’s delusion demonstrated centuries earlier. White posits that this delusion exists in all who persist in wrong.

The Spirit once resisted, there will be less difficulty in resisting it a second time. If we maintain the independence of the natural heart, and refuse the correction of God, we shall . . . stubbornly carry out our own purposes and ideas in the face of the plainest evidence, and shall be in danger of as great deception as came on them. In our blind infatuation we may go to as great lengths as they did, and yet flatter ourselves that we are doing work for God. Those who continue in this course will reap what they have sown.²⁶⁹

In summary, White ties the Pharisees’ unpardonable sin and the progression toward it to the following sequence. First comes a turning from the light. This results in a refusal to listen to the warning of the Holy Spirit. The heart then closes to divine impressions. Finally, rejecting mercy and truth, many “prepare for a course of resistance which, if followed, will continue till we have no power to do otherwise. A point is reached where the most pointed appeals” are ineffectual. The individual’s “desire to submit to God is lost. The spiritual senses become dulled. Darkness is the result.” The Holy Spirit strives with all, but if resisted, conviction is stifled and God gives such up (see Rom 1:21-26) to reap the consequences of their following their own inclinations.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸Ellen G. White, “Judas, the Self-centered, Unconverted Disciple,” *MR*, 20:147-148.

²⁶⁹Ellen G. White, “The Sin of Rejecting Light,” *RH*, July 27, 1897, 465.

²⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 7-8.

Judas

White states Judas had every advantage that he might gain eternal life but “failed to overcome his selfish spirit, and cherished covetousness, which is idolatry, and did not cleanse the soul temple of its defilement.”²⁷¹ He had every opportunity to “receive Christ as his personal Savior,” but refused the gift. He did not convert to Christ nor lose something once possessed. He failed to embrace “the soul cleansing, the change of character, that constitutes conversion.” He had character traits that would have to be overcome to be saved. He would have to be born again. He had heard the “principles outlining the character which all must possess who would enter Christ's kingdom,” but he refused to submit his will and way to Christ—thus fulfilling Scripture (John 13:18, 19).²⁷² Judas’s opportunities were the same as those the other disciples had. White holds that he could have had eternal life “if he had been a doer of the words of Christ and not a hearer only.” His practice of truth “was at variance” with his desires and purposes.²⁷³

White identifies seeds that led to his sin against the Holy Spirit. First, he did not fully surrender to Christ. Second, though “a minister of Christ,” he did not submit to “divine molding.” Third, he felt “he could retain his own judgment and opinions.” Fourth, he nurtured a critical and accusing disposition. Fifth, he had a high opinion of himself. Sixth, he saw his brethren as “greatly inferior.” Seventh, he was blind to his

²⁷¹Ellen G. White, “A Lesson from the Experience of Judas,” *ST*, December 24, 1894, 931. See: White, *Desire of Ages*, 294; 716-717.

²⁷²Ellen G. White, “Judas, the Self-centered, Unconverted Disciple,” *MR*, 20:148-149.

²⁷³Ellen G. White, “The Example of Judas,” *RH*, March 17, 1891, 161. He was not sanctified because “he failed to learn of Christ the daily lessons that he would teach his followers, of meekness and lowliness of heart. He failed to learn the lessons of faith that the other disciples finally learned, and thus became heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ” (Ellen G. White, “A Lesson from the Experience of Judas,” *ST*, December 24, 1894, 931).

character flaws.²⁷⁴ Eighth, he was “open to unbelief,” opening the way for Satan to ferment doubt and rebellion. Ninth, he attempted to explain Christ’s works apart from the divine.²⁷⁵ Finally, “avarice poisoned the life-current of his spirituality.”²⁷⁶

In spite of Judas’s deficiencies in character, White says “Christ placed him where he would have an opportunity to see and correct this.” Ministry gave him the opportunity to develop selflessness, but Judas “indulged his covetous disposition” and pilfered funds for his own ends.²⁷⁷ Christ put him where he could daily be brought in contact with the outflowing of His own unselfish love. If he would open his heart to Christ, divine grace would banish the demon of selfishness, and even Judas might become a subject of the kingdom of God.²⁷⁸

She states that “many a time Judas realized that his character had been portrayed,” but “he still cherished his evil, and would not confess and forsake his unrighteousness. He was self-sufficient, and instead of resisting temptation, he followed his fraudulent practices, and this in the light of the teaching and life of Christ.” In spite of every attempt on Christ’s part to reach Judas, “lesson after lesson fell unheeded.”²⁷⁹

Additionally, White identifies the steps he took toward the unpardonable sin. Initially offended that Christ’s kingdom was spiritual rather than temporal, Judas then “marked out a line upon which he expected Christ to work.” When this remained

²⁷⁴Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 716-717.

²⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 718.

²⁷⁶Ellen G. White, “Judas, the Self-centered, Unconverted Disciple,” *MR*, 20:148-149.

²⁷⁷Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 717.

²⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 275.

²⁷⁹Ellen G. White, “The Example of Judas,” *RH*, March 17, 1891, 161.

unfulfilled, he wanted Jesus to engage in aggressive warfare. Subsequently, he was dismayed that Christ did not challenge the “increasing enmity of the Jewish leaders.” Judas initiated the failed plan “to take Christ by force and make Him king.” Once he realized that Christ offered spiritual rather than worldly advantage (John 6:53) and that no temporal honor would be bestowed on the disciples, he held back from Christ. This led him to express doubts, controversies, sentiments, and arguments “urged by the scribes and Pharisees.” He presented their every challenge as evidence against the gospel’s truthfulness. His strategy included quoting Scripture out of the context of Christ’s teaching. This brought discouragement to the disciples. Yet he manifested a façade of conscientiousness. His desire for a temporal messiahship excited “dissension as to which of them should be greatest,”²⁸⁰ with the result that Satan communicated “his attributes to Judas.”²⁸¹ He “brooded upon his own dark purposes, and cherished his sullen, revengeful thoughts.”²⁸² Thus he “made shipwreck of faith,” in that he allowed jealousy, “doubt, envy, suspicion, bitterness, and hatred” to find place in his heart. He encouraged the “leaven of disaffection.” He “manifested his covetous nature, and displayed his malice and hatred.”²⁸³

Though Judas was spiraling toward the unpardonable sin, White posits that he saw the benefits of helping others and relieving suffering. He also experienced the joy

²⁸⁰Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 718-719.

²⁸¹*Ibid.*, 720.

²⁸²*Ibid.*, 653.

²⁸³Ellen G. White, “A Lesson from the Experience of Judas,” *ST*, December 24, 1894, 930-931.

that came to the hearts of those who were aided by Christ's ministry. "He might have comprehended the methods of Christ. But he was blinded by his own selfish desires."²⁸⁴

Judas's love of money led to his cultivating "the evil spirit of avarice until it had become the ruling motive of his life, overpowering his love for Christ." In becoming enslaved to one vice, he "gave himself to Satan."²⁸⁵ White says he decided "there was nothing to be gained by following Christ,"²⁸⁶ and he became "imbued with the spirit of Satan." Christ's reproof at Simon's feast was the most direct he had received. It provoked him, opening a door "through which Satan entered to control his thoughts." To counter his exposed guilt, he was provoked to madness and chose revenge over repentance.²⁸⁷ When reproved, "his very spirit seemed turned to gall. Wounded pride and desire for revenge broke down the barriers, and the greed so long indulged" took control.²⁸⁸

Judas's heart was not yet hardened beyond return—not even "after he had twice pledged himself to betray" Christ. White posits that he adopted a fatalistic view of the impending betrayal and crucifixion.²⁸⁹ "Until this step was taken, Judas had not passed beyond the possibility of repentance. But when he left the presence of his Lord, the final decision had been made. He had passed the boundary line."²⁹⁰ He then stoically reasoned

²⁸⁴Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 718-719.

²⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 716.

²⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 645.

²⁸⁷Ellen G. White, "Judas, the Self-centered, Unconverted Disciple," *MR*, 20:146-147.

²⁸⁸Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 720.

²⁸⁹*Ibid.*

²⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 654-655.

that he might as well benefit from the inevitable. Even so, he believed Christ would escape death.²⁹¹

“Satan bound Judas to his side to be his human agent” to orchestrate Christ’s death. Yet his conscience was not yet dead.²⁹² White states that he was extremely remorseful and terrified when Christ submitted to His arrest and sentence. His conscience was smitten, resulting in his vocal confession and acknowledgment of Christ as Son of God. However, his confession “was forced from his guilty soul by an awful sense of condemnation and a looking for of judgment, but he felt no deep, heartbreaking grief that he had betrayed the spotless Son of God.”²⁹³

White sees the fall of Judas to be the fate common to all who persist “in tampering with sin. The elements of depravity that are not resisted and overcome” will fall under Satan’s “temptation, and the soul is led captive at his will.”²⁹⁴ She views such betrayal of Christ as rampant today²⁹⁵ and evident when people use underhanded means to their own advantage. Selfishness “leads them to plan for their individual interests.” Enmity and character flaws remain disguised until under threat of reproof and exposure. Bitterness is then exposed.²⁹⁶ Character defects are inexcusable in Calvary’s light; pride, selfishness, and rebellion are unacceptable. If held onto, “there will come a time when the boundary line of God’s mercy and forbearance will be reached.” Hearing the Word is

²⁹¹Ibid., 720-721.

²⁹²Ellen G. White, “A Lesson from the Experience of Judas,” *ST*, December 24, 1894, 931.

²⁹³Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 721-722.

²⁹⁴Ibid., 720.

²⁹⁵“A Religious Fraud” [Matt 26:14], *SDABC*, 5:1102.

²⁹⁶Ellen G. White, “Judas, the Self-centered, Unconverted Disciple,” *MR*, 20:146-147.

insufficient. Avoidance of condemnation requires living the Word.²⁹⁷ All have “some mastering passion which must be overcome or it will overcome him and plunge the soul into ruin.” Objectionable traits of character need to be overcome, or Satan takes advantage to defile the whole person.²⁹⁸

In summary, White demonstrates that Judas had every opportunity to embrace Christ, but refused to do so, choosing rather to indulge his disposition and deficiencies of character. Throughout his progression toward the unpardonable sin Judas appreciated the benefits of helping others and relieving suffering, experiencing the joy that comes to those who felt Christ’s influence. But in choosing to remain enslaved to one vice, he surrendered himself to Satan. His sin was compounded through his using underhanded means for his own advantage. White argues that Judas’s conscience was active and smitten right to the end of his life.

Ananias and Sapphira

Ellen White regards God’s judgment of Ananias and Sapphira as the result of the unpardonable sin. Living outside of the principles of the gospel leads to this sin (e.g., self-justification and appropriation of funds to counter “fancied” deficiencies). She warns against all selfish actions in that they are known to God who will punish every “hidden evil, however secret.”²⁹⁹

In this case, the unpardonable sin found its roots in “covetousness (Acts 4:34, 35)

²⁹⁷Ellen G. White, “The Example of Judas,” *RH*, March 17, 1891, 161.

²⁹⁸Ellen G. White, “A Lesson from the Experience of Judas,” *ST*, December 24, 1894, 931.

²⁹⁹Ellen G. White, “Words of Council Regarding the Management of the Work of God,” *MR*, 13:188-189.

and was exacerbated by their being under the conviction of the Holy Spirit.” This was the result of hereditary and cultivated character traits that led them to actuate deceit and fraud³⁰⁰ to the cost of their lives.³⁰¹ We must not disregard any vow that we have made under the influence of the Holy Spirit; a contract with God is greater than one with mankind.³⁰²

Both Ananias and Sapphira were fraudulent in dealing with God; both lied to the Holy Spirit.³⁰³ “Their judgment testified that men cannot deceive God, that He detects the hidden sin of the heart, and that He will not be mocked.”³⁰⁴

Ananias and Sapphira committed their ultimate sin against the Holy Spirit at the end of a series downward steps. The first step occurred when they “began to regret their promise and soon lost the sweet influence of the blessing that had warmed their hearts with a desire to do large things in behalf of the cause of Christ.” Next, they allowed themselves to feel that “they had been too hasty, that they ought to reconsider their decision.” This led them to talk “the matter over, and [decide] not to fulfill their pledge.” However, they saw “that those who parted with their possessions to supply the needs of their poorer brethren, were held in high esteem among the believers.” As a result they were “ashamed to have their brethren know that their selfish souls grudged that which they had solemnly dedicated to God.” So “they deliberately decided to sell their property

³⁰⁰Ellen G. White, “Words of Council Regarding the Management of the Work of God,” *MR*, 13:188.

³⁰¹*Ibid.*

³⁰²*Ibid.*, 74.

³⁰³Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 72.

³⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 73-74.

and pretend to give all the proceeds into the general fund, but really to keep a large share for themselves. Thus they would secure their living from the common store and at the same time gain the high esteem of their brethren.”³⁰⁵

If acted upon, the principle of covetousness perverts the conscience, which ultimately results in the betrayal of God’s cause and the loss of eternal life.³⁰⁶ Ellen White cautions that “the hearts of men become hardened through selfishness, and [men] are tempted to withhold part of the price, while pretending to fulfill God’s requirements. Many spend money lavishly in self-gratification;” they consult “their pleasure and gratify their taste, while they bring to God, almost unwillingly, a stinted offering. They forget that God will one day demand a strict account of how His goods have been used, and that He will no more accept the pittance they hand into the treasury than He accepted the offering of Ananias and Sapphira.” God has a deep hatred and contempt for all deception and hypocrisy. Through pretense, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit. Such falsehood will exclude many from eternal life (Rev 21:27). White cautions that playing “fast and loose with truth, and dissembling to suit one’s own selfish plans” causes “shipwreck of faith.”³⁰⁷

In summary, White ties Ananias’s and Sapphira’s commission of the unpardonable sin to their living outside the principles of the gospel (self-centered living). Their sin was the consequence of hereditary and cultivated traits of character. When acted

³⁰⁵Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 72.

³⁰⁶Ellen G. White, “Words of Council Regarding the Management of the Work of God,” *MR*, 13:189-190.

³⁰⁷Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 75-76.

upon, covetousness perverts (does not kill) the conscience, which then allows the guilty to attempt to deceive the Holy Spirit, and that, in turn, ends in the loss of eternal life.

Forms of the Unpardonable Sin

There is no mystery for Ellen White as to the essence of the unpardonable sin. The sin against the Holy Spirit is found in the persistent refusal to respond to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as one's "personal" Savior.³⁰⁸ The sin comes in various forms. First, it is a rejection of God—either in the person of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit—and a rejection of God's claims and authority. Second, it is a rejection of God's truth. Third, it takes the form of animosity, hatred, and persecution against the children of God (the body of Christ) or population groups. Finally, it is seen in abuse of, slander of, or inhumanity toward individuals, especially the agents of God.

Rejection of the Person and Authority of God

"Every step of rejection of Christ is a step toward the rejection of the goodness of salvation, and toward the sin against the Holy Spirit."³⁰⁹ This was the cause of sin in the lives of many Jews in the time of Christ, for by rejecting Him, they were rejecting His invitation of mercy. Ellen White posits that one can reject Christ through the refusal to listen to Christ's delegated messengers. So long as this is the case, man "can find no hope or pardon, and he will finally lose all desire to be reconciled to God." One does not need to deliberately choose evil, but merely to neglect to align oneself with the kingdom of

³⁰⁸Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:634.

³⁰⁹Ellen G. White, "Confession of Christ," *YI*, August 8, 1895, 250.

light. “If we do not co-operate with the heavenly agencies, Satan will take possession of the heart, and will make it his abiding place.”³¹⁰

Rejection of Truth

In its most common form, the unpardonable sin is found in the persistent slighting of God’s invitation to repent. When people reject spiritual light, they become blind, and their hearts are hardened. While Ellen White holds that the unpardonable sin is not always dependent on a deliberate choosing of darkness, at times she does make that connection. She argues that “some who profess to make the word of God their study are found living in direct opposition to its plainest teachings.” She then elaborates that “those who serve their own lusts turn from all this light. They will not cease their course of sin, but continue to take pleasure in unrighteousness in the face of the threatenings and vengeance of God against those who do such things.”³¹¹

White equates rejection of received truth without repentance as a sin greater than that which led to Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction. As exemplified by Christ in the wilderness, there must be a striving to overcome. “It is not pleasant to overcome as Christ overcame; and many turn away from the Pattern which is plainly given them to copy, and refuse to imitate the example that [Christ] came from the heavenly courts to set for them.” The unpardonable sin is not merely rejecting God’s light, but includes failure to surrender the heart fully to Christ.³¹²

³¹⁰Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 324.

³¹¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:454-455.

³¹²Ellen G. White, “The Sin of Rejecting Light,” *RH*, July 27, 1897, 465-466.

Animosity against God's Children

Ellen White implies that Pharaoh's progress to the sin against the Holy Spirit began with his abuse of God's children,³¹³ which led first to his rejection of God's messengers³¹⁴ and then extended to his rejection of the divine truth which they bore.³¹⁵ This culminated in rebellion against the authority and person of God Himself.³¹⁶

Rejection of God's Agents

It becomes evident from Ellen White's narratives about Pharaoh³¹⁷ and Korah³¹⁸ that the unpardonable sin is at times the result of hate, slander, abuse, and disregard for the children of God. Pharaoh and Korah reviled Moses, and because Moses was God's servant carrying out God's mission, this was equivalent to their rebelling against truth and the authority of God. The unpardonable sin committed by the Pharisees was their rejection of Christ.

Those Who Commit the Sin

The unpardonable sin is not committed by those who faithfully stand under the banner of Jesus Christ as His foot soldiers, nor is it limited to any one period or

³¹³Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:196-197.

³¹⁴*Ibid.*, 1:197-198.

³¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1:190.

³¹⁶Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 166-267.

³¹⁷Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:197-198.

³¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 395-396.

generation. The Jews committed the sin against the Holy Spirit by refusing Christ's invitation of mercy.³¹⁹

The unpardonable sin is committed by willfully rejecting the Holy Spirit's ministry, declaring it to be of Satan, for the Holy Spirit alone can reach man through faith and repentance. Nothing more can be done for the person who has finally and fully rejected the Holy Spirit.³²⁰ The sin against the Holy Spirit arises in the absence of spirituality and holiness, which Ellen White claims leads to unrighteous acts such as envy, hatred, jealousy, evil surmising, "and every hateful and abominable sin."³²¹ Those who gossip, sow discord due to jealousy, surmise evil, or covet, grieve the Holy Spirit, "for they are working at cross-purposes with God, instead of answering Christ's purposes, or answering His prayer that His disciples may be one as He is one with the Father. Such persons are working entirely in the lines the enemy has marked out."³²²

Unsubdued, lustful passions are strengthened in Satan's cause, leading souls to death.³²³ Telling others they have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit is not of God.³²⁴ One should not bring discouragement by treating some as if they had committed the unpardonable sin. Rather, encouragement is the only appropriate action for the child of God.³²⁵

³¹⁹Ellen G. White, "Confession of Christ," *YI*, August 8, 1895, 250.

³²⁰Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 322-324.

³²¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:445.

³²²Ellen G. White to Philip Wessels, 3 February 1899, Letter 20, 1899, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³²³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:454.

³²⁴Ellen G. White, "Co-workers with Christ," *RH*, July 30, 1901, 483.

³²⁵Ellen G. White, "Visit to Paradise Valley," *RH*, August 8, 1907, 9.

In summary, White posits that the unpardonable sin is not confined to any era, individual, or place. The sin against the Holy Spirit is a willful rejection of the Holy Spirit's ministry and Christ's mercy. The sin is the result of unsubdued passions that result in man doing the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21).

Facilitators of the Sin

The Holy Spirit is provoked to leave through resistance to Him. Once this occurs, the human agent "will follow step by step in the footsteps of Satan." These individuals then end up misconstruing, misinterpreting, and ridiculing Scripture, the righteous, and the Ten Commandments. Every appeal and rebuke becomes meaningless. "They have followed the counsel of their own heart until truth is no more truth to them."³²⁶

God does not harden men's hearts. Rather, He sends light to correct errors and lead men in safe paths. People move toward committing the unpardonable sin in a process that often is gradual and virtually imperceptible. As each ray of light is disregarded, there is an increasing "benumbing of the spiritual perceptions," so that the next revelation of truth is "less clearly discerned." This results in the increasing of darkness until the soul is left in total darkness.³²⁷

Refusal to live in the light which God provides has several consequences. First, White argues the conscience becomes increasingly ineffectual. Next, the individual is left to follow his own life course and judgment. This results in the voice of God becoming increasingly distant. The individual becomes increasingly self-infatuated and stubborn, despising counsel and correction. After this, he turns away "from every provision made

³²⁶Ellen G. White, MS 28, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³²⁷Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 324.

for his salvation.” The result is that the Holy Spirit ceases to exert “a restraining power” over the person, for he has now rejected the working of the Holy Spirit.³²⁸ “One passion after another, one project after another, sways the heart, and expels the Holy Spirit from the soul. The love of the world is permitted to come in and take possession of, and rule the heart.”³²⁹

White believes this process occurs as a result of unbelief, envy, criticism, doubt, and the misunderstanding and perversion of truth. Some of these facilitators are against God while others are against one’s fellow man.³³⁰ Those who reach this spiritual state end up making concerted attempts to “seduce others” into following the same path.³³¹

In summary, White holds that the unpardonable sin is facilitated by a gradual and imperceptible resisting of the Holy Spirit. The sin results in misconstruing, perverting, and misinterpreting the truth; and the ridiculing of Scripture, the law, and the righteous. The sin against the Holy Spirit is a consequence of self-infatuation and the despising of counsel and correction, leaving one open to envy, criticism, and doubt, which, in turn, make all appeals and rebukes ineffectual.

Safeguards against the Sin

Christ’s blood, available through faith and belief, washes away all guilt. Ellen White says that in personal surrender to Christ, a new power “takes possession of the new heart.” The individual cannot do this for himself or herself. The yielded soul becomes

³²⁸Ellen G. White, “Peril of Sinning against Light,” *RH*, June 29, 1897, 401-402.

³²⁹Ellen G. White, MS 52, 1896, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³³⁰Ellen G. White, “Place a Right Estimate Upon Eternal Things,” *MR*, 4:359.

³³¹Ellen G. White, “The Teacher Sent from God,” *MR*, 16:89.

Christ's fortress. "A soul thus kept in possession by the heavenly agencies is impregnable to the assaults of Satan." The "only defense against evil is the indwelling of Christ in the heart through faith in His righteousness. Unless one becomes vitally connected with God, one can never resist the unhallowed effects of self-love, self-indulgence, and temptation. One may leave off many bad habits, but without a vital connection with God, through the surrender of self "to Him moment by moment, one shall be overcome. Without a personal acquaintance with Christ, and a continual communion," one is "at the mercy" of Satan.³³²

Self-denial and taking up the cross of Christ are essential parts of the antidote to the unpardonable sin³³³—as is meeting "together for conference and prayer."³³⁴ Vanity and pride stand at the sin's heart.³³⁵ White states that one must be a living branch "of the heavenly Vine" and receive Christ's nourishment. This will prevent fruitlessness and provide vigor and fruit to the glory of God, as well as victory to "depart from all iniquity" and live in holiness.³³⁶ This is partly accomplished by: (1) receiving Christ's words (Isa 57:15); (2) having a contrite, humble spirit; (3) heeding the reproof and encouragement found in God's Word; (4) walking "worthy of the Lord;" (5) being fruitful in every good work; (6) increasing in the knowledge of God; (7) growing in patience, long-suffering, and joy (the fruit of the Spirit); and, (8) retraining our tongues to speak only that which edifies.³³⁷

³³²Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 324.

³³³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:81.

³³⁴*Ibid.*, 4:106-107.

³³⁵*Ibid.*, 3:82.

³³⁶*Ibid.*, 2:441.

³³⁷Ellen G. White, "Our Words—No. 1," *RH*, January 18, 1898, 2.

In summary, White claims the individual is safeguarded against the unpardonable sin through personal surrender to Jesus Christ. Surrender requires self-denial, rejection of pride, and taking up one's cross. One can meet these requirements only as one becomes a living branch attached to the Vine (Christ), which results in one producing fruits in keeping with repentance.

General Summary and Conclusions

Ellen G. White's doctrine of the unpardonable sin grows naturally out of and is compatible with her views of sin and salvation. She portrays one's exercise of God's will as revealed in Scripture to be an essential factor in one's salvation. As Gen 1:26-27 indicates, man was created to reflect God's physical likeness and moral character, both of which were severely affected by man's fall into sin. Election is the consequence of one's walk with Christ and not the result of divine determinism. There is no unconditional election—Christ works for the salvation of all.

White posits that God's foreknowledge does not shape character; all men behave in accordance with their individual free wills. Man either cooperates with or does not cooperate with the divine will, and the choice one makes has eternal consequences. The Holy Spirit enables all to exercise the will freely. One may overcome sin in Christ's strength.

White says justification is offered to all on condition of their repentance and acceptance of Christ's atonement. The consequence of justification is a radical change of heart and mind. She identifies sanctification as the transformation of the human character into a counterpart of God's character. The faithful study of Scripture and its application to the life through the indwelling Spirit is what effects this transformation, and the result

is perfection of character; for as one is convicted of sin, he is brought into harmony with God's laws and emulates Christ's character. Faith is active—a conduit of grace through which Christ's merits and character are appropriated and sin is overcome.

Regarding the conscience, White holds that it is not a trustworthy sign of one's standing with God. If violated, it is weakened, and it can become hardened and cease to recognize and warn man of sin's approach.

As for sin, God allowed the beings He created to become sinners—to bring sin into His creation—because if He had forced His will upon sentient creatures, He would have violated and destroyed what are foundational principles of His kingdom—indeed, central elements of His character: love and free will. With the power God can provide, man can overcome sin. Many of White's comments on the unpardonable sin arise out of stories found in Scripture. From the story of the Exodus she posits that God did not exercise supernatural power to harden Pharaoh's heart. Before each plague was poured out upon Egypt, the monarch understood its nature and effects and had the opportunity to save himself and his nation from it. However, he persisted in rejecting all evidence of divine activity.

The Pharisees became so hardened in their rejection of the Holy Spirit's appeals that they were no longer conscious of them. Though the Spirit strives with all, those who reject His strongest promptings are given over to their own inclinations.

Judas's betrayal grew out of his previous choices. He had been given every opportunity but continually chose to indulge his disposition and the deficiencies of his character. By retaining one vice, he ultimately surrendered himself to Satan.

White is faithful to her non-compabilist presuppositions regarding the

unpardonable sin. She argues that this sin against the Holy Spirit grows out of one's rejection of divine grace and truth. Such rejection is the result of retaining one's unregenerate disposition and character deficiencies rather than overcoming them through the power that God gives to those who surrender fully to Him. This sin is not the consequence of divine election or reprobation. Rather, it is the result of an unrelenting resistance to God that eventually leads one to misinterpret the truth and ridicule Scripture, the law, and the righteous.

The unpardonable sin is a consequence of allowing self rather than Christ to sit on the throne of one's life. One commits it only when one has continually and finally resisted all rebukes and appeals to turn from one's sin and surrender fully to God.

CHAPTER 5

COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF BERKOUWER AND WHITE

In determining the nature and scope of this dissertation, the first chapter noted that Scripture provides numerous definitions for sin. It was stated that while the “concept of sin is complex and the terminology large and varied.”¹ Sin is understood from two perspectives. The first is that of sin as an act. It “is whatever act, attitude, or course of life betrays the divine intent for created being. Sin alienates from God, divides the sinner from the community, disorders the life of the sinner, and in that measure disorders creation itself.”² As discussed in the first chapter, the biblical definitions for sin are varied in both Old and New Testaments. It was said that just as there are many concepts of sin, there are various interpretations of these concepts. Whatever the term used for sin, each holds a commonality in that all these sins are pardonable due of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The second perspective regarding sin is that it is a condition of the heart and mind,³ a state of being,⁴ and a broken relationship.⁵

¹Dorani, *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, 736.

²McClendon, “Sin,” *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, 442.

³Knight, *The Pharisee’s Guide to Perfect Holiness*, 18, 20-21; Jiri Moskala, “Sin,” *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 1165-1167.

⁴Knight, *The Pharisee’s Guide to Perfect Holiness*, 36, 46.

⁵Knight, *Sin and Salvation*, 2008, 41.

The premise of the dissertation has been that a troublesome concept pertaining to sin is that of the sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31-32, Mark 3:29, Luke 12:10) in that it is unpardonable, for it either will not or cannot be forgiven, making salvation impossible. It thus challenges some individuals' perceptions regarding the biblical doctrine of salvation, in that for such individuals, Christ died in vain. While this sin demonstrates God's complete respect for human freedom, it raises questions with some concerning the character of God.

In chapter 2 a brief overview of the three Synoptic texts (Matt 12:31, 32; Mark 3:28-30; and Luke 12:10) that mention the sin against the Holy Spirit was presented. This was provided in a brief survey of New Testament scholars and theologians. Thereafter, the dissertation examined those theologians within the compatibilist tradition who most impacted G. C. Berkouwer regarding the unpardonable sin. This was followed by an overview of several non-compatibilist scholars preceding Ellen G. White. By so doing, a foundation was laid that provided a basis for theological insight and continuity for the positions of Berkouwer and White in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapters 2 through 4 demonstrated their positions to be consistent with their respective schools of thought. In that the theologies of Berkouwer and White directly impact their understandings of the unpardonable sin, this chapter will first compare their theological presuppositions. Thereafter the chapter will undertake a comparison of their doctrines of the unpardonable sin. In making each comparison this chapter will first review where they hold common ground and then examine their differences.

Comparison of the Presuppositions of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White

Nature of Scripture

Both Berkouwer and White understand the Word of God comes to man written by the human agent. Ellen G. White sees the human writer as God's penman rather than His pen,⁶ and so does Berkouwer. For him Holy Scripture is God speaking in the manner of men,⁷ with a human character.⁸ Both reject the church as being the arbitrator of biblical teaching.⁹ The main difference between them is that while Berkouwer sees salvation as dependent upon divine election, White sees salvation as dependent upon the exercise of the knowledge of God's will as revealed in Holy Scripture.¹⁰

Human Nature: Ontology of the Unpardonable Sin

G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White share certain commonalities in their understanding of the nature of man in that man must be understood in his relation to God. Moreover, both connect the restoration of God's image in man to the doctrine of salvation.¹¹ However, their positions take different paths in their understandings of what

⁶The human writer is God's penman rather than His pen; thus the men, rather than the words are inspired. These men were imbued with God's thoughts as the Holy Spirit enhanced memory and kept the content honest. See: Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:21.

⁷Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 156.

⁸*Ibid.*, 112.

⁹*Ibid.*, 41; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 57, 101.

¹⁰For White, while justification is vital to salvation, justification must be accompanied by sanctification and obedience to the divine will as revealed in Holy Scripture. See: Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 476-478; *idem*, "Search the Scriptures," *YI*, July 24, 1902, 1.

¹¹Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 45; Ellen G. White, "Character Tested by Small Occurrences," *RH*, October 15, 1895, 657; *idem*, "The Good Shepherd's Estimate of a Lost Sheep," *ST*, November 20, 1893, 36.

constitutes the image of God in Gen 1:26-27. This divergence is central to the disparity between them in regard to their doctrines of the unpardonable sin.

We will briefly examine the common ground Berkouwer and White share regarding man in relation to God, before comparing their positions regarding Gen 1:26-27 and the resulting implications. First, Berkouwer's position is that man can only be understood only in the light of divine revelation and in relationship with God.¹² White posits that men and women were created as counterparts to God and were a reflection of His mental, physical, and spiritual nature.¹³ Thus, for White, man must be understood in the context of his or her relationship (or lack of relationship) to God. For both, sin almost obliterated this image and likeness.¹⁴

Berkouwer believes Gen 1:26-27's *tselem* and *Demuth* to be mere synonyms used in repetition, which appear promiscuously and for no special reason.¹⁵ The purpose of the repetition is to reflect a relationship between man and his Creator and provide man with lordship over all that surrounds him.¹⁶ White, on the other hand, understands Gen 1:26-27 to demonstrate that man was created to reflect both God's physical likeness and moral character,¹⁷ both of which were severely impacted by man's fall from purity into sin.¹⁸ In

¹²Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 23, 26.

¹³Ellen G. White, "Sacrificed for Us," *YI*, July 20, 1899, 2; idem, *Selected Messages*, 3:133; "Go Ye Into All the World," *RH*, June 11, 1895, 369.

¹⁴Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 33; Ellen G. White, "The Condition of Acceptance," *RH*, February 14, 1888, 97-98.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 69-70.

¹⁷Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15-16.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, "The Condition of Acceptance," *RH*, February 14, 1888, 97-98.

White's theology, sanctification must therefore include a restoration of both the physical and moral life. Transformation results in the restoration of God's character¹⁹ (fruit of the Spirit and obedience to the Law).²⁰ This plan of redemption is the focus of all Scripture and must be completed prior to eternal life.²¹ On the other hand, for Berkouwer man is lost and can only be sought and found, contributing absolutely nothing to his salvation.²² Yet biblical soteriology does return man to his true nature, which is the new birth.²³

Divine Election and Rejection

Berkouwer and White take a divergent stance from each other in relation to divine election and rejection. For Berkouwer, divine election is one of the secret things of God.²⁴ Divine election must be understood as the only means of salvation.²⁵ Moreover, man has no role to play in his salvation for election is unconditional.²⁶ However, man does play a role in his damnation,²⁷ with judgment being the result of divine rejection.²⁸

¹⁹Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15-16.

²⁰Ellen G. White, "The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven," *ST*, August 21, 1893, 646; idem, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 305.

²¹Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, 233; idem, *Education*, 18; idem, *Testimonies*, 2:355-356.

²²Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 143-145.

²³*Ibid.*, 99-101, 103.

²⁴Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 12-13.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 74. 184-185.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 150-151.

²⁷Berkouwer, *Sin*, 102.

²⁸Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 183.

Furthermore, while God is responsible for election, He is not responsible for reprobation.²⁹

On the other hand, White understands election as the consequence of a person's walk with Christ³⁰ rather than the result of divine determinism. Unconditional election does not exist, for Christ works for the salvation of all. God's foreknowledge shapes the characters of no one as all act in accordance with their individual free wills.³¹

The Human Will

Berkouwer and White are at opposites when it pertains to the human will; and their respective positions lie at the core of the premise of this dissertation: that the unpardonable sin is a direct affront to the biblical doctrine of salvation. Berkouwer rejects synergism, for he believes that God cannot be dependent on granting salvation based on the human decision (though God honors the human will).³² God neither recognizes man's decision nor function as constituent to his salvation,³³ for man lost his freedom at the fall. Human freedom must be understood as not a choice between options for true freedom is "from" something rather than "to" something.³⁴

In contradiction to Berkouwer's position, White endorses human cooperation with the divine will, positing that human choice stands for eternity.³⁵ Yet it must be

²⁹Ibid., 187-188.

³⁰Ellen G. White, MS 75a, 1900, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³¹Ellen G. White, "Walk in the Light," *RH*, November 13, 1900, 1.

³²Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 28.

³³Berkouwer, *Sin*, 116.

³⁴Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 318-319.

³⁵Ellen G. White, "Sowing and Reaping," *YI*, May 9, 1901, 4.

understood that the Holy Spirit enables humanity to exercise the will freely and man may overcome sin³⁶ in the strength of Christ Jesus. However, this can only be accomplished when there is a willingness to put self aside. Otherwise, in the absence of genuine repentance, the individual becomes spiritually incapacitated.³⁷

The Role of Faith

Berkouwer promotes a faith that is consistent with his compatibilist theology. This faith has little impact on (or is impacted little by) human action, perseverance, or grace³⁸ for they are not co-ordinate factors resulting in salvation.³⁹ Faith is not autonomous, working synergistically with divine power. Faith's main contribution to the Christian life is that it rests in God's sovereign work,⁴⁰ confirming divine election in human understanding and knowledge.⁴¹ Thus faith merely confirms what God has determined for the individual.

For White, faith is active, a conduit of grace through which Christ's merits and character are appropriated.⁴² Faith rests upon Scripture, yet must be acted upon.⁴³ Exercise of faith results in an individual's ability to overcome sin and obey God in

³⁶Ellen G. White, "The Religion that is Unto Salvation," *ST*, September 4, 1893, 679.

³⁷Ellen G. White, "Sin and Its Results," *RH*, June 4, 1901, 355.

³⁸Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 114.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 42-44.

⁴¹Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 179.

⁴²Ellen G. White, MS 1, 1898, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁴³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:258.

meekness and humility.⁴⁴ This is evident in the Holy Spirit changing human character to reflect the divine character.⁴⁵ Therefore faith does more than confirm what God has determined; it also becomes the vehicle by which the Holy Spirit brings change to the individual.

Justification

Both Berkouwer and White embrace the belief that justification is from Christ and comes to man unmerited. Justification is a divine act centered in the cross.⁴⁶ However, for Berkouwer justification is dependent upon the doctrine of election and is thus dependent upon divine determinism.⁴⁷ Though repentance is tied to justification⁴⁸—not all men are justified simply because not all men are offered divine pardon through election.

On the other hand, White argues that justification is offered to all men and women on condition that they personally repent and accept Christ's atonement. At the point of repentance, divine pardon is made effective. The exercise of faith through rejection of self-justification renders justification conditional. The consequence of justification is a radical change of heart and mind⁴⁹—thus not all men are justified simply because not all men are willing to repent.

⁴⁴Ibid., 5:438.

⁴⁵Ellen G. White, to Brother and Sister Grainger, 24 October 1892, Letter 7, 1892; idem, MS 16, 1890, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁴⁶Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 45; Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:390-391.

⁴⁷Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 163.

⁴⁸Ibid., 45.

⁴⁹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:389-93.

Sanctification

Both Berkouwer and White endorse a sanctification that transforms the life.⁵⁰ For both, sanctification is a process towards righteousness.⁵¹ For both, sanctification is closely tied to an obedience or conformity to the Word and Law of God. Furthermore, for both, such obedience is a response to the divine command. While for Berkouwer the demand of the law cannot be impersonally fulfilled,⁵² for White personal conformity reflects the Christian experience, and “men take knowledge that they have been with Jesus and learned of Him. Christ and the believer become one, and His beauty of character is revealed in those who are vitally connected with the Source of power and love.”⁵³ Both see this relationship between sanctification and obedience as the result of the imitation of Christ.⁵⁴ A sanctified character is seen by both as the fruit of the Spirit.⁵⁵

Berkouwer sees both justification and sanctification as imparted by God,⁵⁶ while White views justification as imputed and sanctification as imparted.⁵⁷ However, their compatibilist and non-compatibilist theologies result in a divergence of opinion on the cause of sanctification. Even though accompanied by human activity, Berkouwer sees

⁵⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 12-13, 78; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:52.

⁵¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 77, 108; Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister S. N. Haskell, 27 September, 1902, Letter 153, 1902, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁵²Berkouwer, *The Image of God*, 277-278.

⁵³Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:397-398.

⁵⁴Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 135; Ellen G. White, “Restoration of the Image of God,” *MR*, 9:371.

⁵⁵Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 107-108; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:453-454; idem, *Selected Messages*, 1:398.

⁵⁶Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 108.

⁵⁷Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, 150.

sanctification as the consequence of election.⁵⁸ Sanctification is a divine act independent of human synergism and nomism.⁵⁹ Even the perseverance of the saints comes independent of man's faithfulness, though human diligence is required.⁶⁰ Berkouwer resolves the tension between God's act and human activity by identifying this as a mystery of God.⁶¹

On the other hand, White identifies sanctification as the transformation of the human character back into one that is a counterpart of God's character⁶² with Christ as author of the changed life.⁶³ This happens as the divine becomes united in character with the human.⁶⁴ Berkouwer understands the transformation of character as an act of God independent of human synergism,⁶⁵ while White sees the power behind transformation being the faithful study of Scripture applied to the life,⁶⁶ through claiming God's promises,⁶⁷ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁸ This renewal recreates man in the

⁵⁸Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 142.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 18-21, 53.

⁶⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 9-10, 222-223.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁶²Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:52.

⁶³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:52; *idem*, "The Word of Truth the Way to Heaven," *ST*, August 21, 1893, 645-646; *idem*, "Restoration of the Image of God," *MR*, 9:375.

⁶⁴Ellen G. White, "Restoration of the Image of God," *MR*, 9:375.

⁶⁵Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 53.

⁶⁶Ellen G. White to Workers in Southern California, 3 October 1907, Letter 340, 1907, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁶⁷Ellen G. White, "Restoration of the Image of God," *MR*, 9:371.

⁶⁸Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister S. N. Haskell, 27 September, 1902, Letter 153, 1902, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

image of God⁶⁹ with the result that the human character is reshaped after the divine.⁷⁰

Role of the Holy Spirit

For Berkouwer, the Holy Spirit penetrates the human heart with the promise of salvation⁷¹ and then produces change in the individual by reason of His superiority.⁷² The purpose of conviction is to reveal the presence of sin.⁷³ However, the change that the Holy Spirit brings comes without human synergism⁷⁴ though human cooperation does exist when God's grace is magnified,⁷⁵ for the elect have a certain disposition of the mind which changes hearts and wills.⁷⁶ Again, Berkouwer's tension between divine superiority and human activity are eased through recognizing the presence of divine mystery.⁷⁷ Finally, the evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit is the resulting fruit.⁷⁸

Ellen White argues that the purpose for change in the believer is to fit him or her for heaven by instilling the righteousness of Christ. The believer's life proceeds to conform to the character of Christ as the image of God is reproduced in the life. This

⁶⁹Ellen G. White, *Education*, 18.

⁷⁰Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 8:267.

⁷¹Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 28-30.

⁷²Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 48.

⁷³Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 219-222.

⁷⁴Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 48.

⁷⁵Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 121.

⁷⁶Berkouwer, *Sin*, 320.

⁷⁷Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 81.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 79.

change is dependent upon human cooperation.⁷⁹ The end result is perfection of character;⁸⁰ for as man is convicted of sin, he is brought into harmony with God's laws and into a reflection of the character of Christ.⁸¹

Role of Conscience

Both Berkouwer and White understand the conscience to be a means by which God is able to respond to the prompting of God⁸² and bring conviction of sin.⁸³ Both recognize the need for conscience to be protected, for sin is able to corrupt it.⁸⁴ For Berkouwer, the conscience witnesses to God's goodness and is the means by which man is able to believe in God.⁸⁵ White posits that the conscience is the voice of God,⁸⁶ an inner light, with Scripture as its eyesalve.⁸⁷ For the conscience to be effective, it must be transformed⁸⁸ and fall under divine guidance and the authority of Scripture.⁸⁹

However, Berkouwer and White disagree on the reliability of a seared conscience. Berkouwer maintains that the dread of having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit is

⁷⁹Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:394-395.

⁸⁰Ellen G. White, *SDABC*, 6:1097.

⁸¹Ellen G. White, "Changed into His Image," *RH*, December 5, 1912, 3-4.

⁸²Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 171-174; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:120.

⁸³Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 171-174; Ellen G. White, *SDABC*, 7:965.

⁸⁴Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 174-177; Ellen G. White, *Temperance*, 79-80.

⁸⁵Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 171-174.

⁸⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:120.

⁸⁷Ellen G. White, *SDABC*, 7:965.

⁸⁸Ellen G. White to Sands Lane, 12 April, 1903, Letter 162, 1903, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁸⁹Ellen G. White to Howard Miller and Madison Miller, 23 July 1889, Letter 4, 1889, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

evidence that the unpardonable sin has not occurred.⁹⁰ In contrast, White holds that the conscience is temperamental,⁹¹ can go to extremes,⁹² and may become numbed.⁹³ Conscience is never an indication of one's standing with God and is only trustworthy under divine grace.⁹⁴ If violated, conscience is weakened and may become hardened.⁹⁵

Origin and Nature of Sin

Gerrit C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White share much common ground in their respective doctrines of the origin and nature of sin. However, they have significant disagreements that directly impact their understanding of the unpardonable sin.

Points of agreement between them include the following. First, Berkouwer sees sin as an illicit incursion and a different reality,⁹⁶ while White calls sin a mysterious intruder.⁹⁷ For Berkouwer, sin is senseless and without motive.⁹⁸ White concurs, labeling it as mysterious and unaccountable.⁹⁹ Second, both agree that sin is always against God, though often played out against one's fellowman.¹⁰⁰ Third, both connect sin to a

⁹⁰Berkouwer, *Sin*, 343.

⁹¹Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Prescott, 8 August, 1898, Letter 71, 1898, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁹²Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:319.

⁹³Ellen G. White, *Temperance*, 79-80.

⁹⁴Ellen G. White, "Obedience the Fruit of Union with Christ—No. 2," *RH*, September 3, 1901, 567-568.

⁹⁵Ellen G. White, MS 9, 1903, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁹⁶Berkouwer, *Sin*, 101

⁹⁷Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 493.

⁹⁸Berkouwer, *Sin*, 63-64; idem, *Man: The Image of God*, 142.

⁹⁹Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 493.

¹⁰⁰Berkouwer, *Sin*, 242-244; Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:197-198.

departure from the character of God in that Berkouwer sees it as a violation against the commandment to love¹⁰¹ while White claims that imperfection of character is sin.¹⁰² Furthermore, Berkouwer acknowledges a connection between sin, the law of God and righteousness,¹⁰³ agreeing with White that sin is a transgression of that same law and an outworking of a principle against love.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Berkouwer claims that sin is fueled by self-justification¹⁰⁵ and White argues that it is incurable when accompanied by pride.¹⁰⁶

Neither pay much credence to differences between the magnitudes of various sins.¹⁰⁷ Unconfessed and unresolved sin ultimately results in loss of divine grace and separation from Christ.¹⁰⁸ White adds that any sin held onto makes one incapable of spiritual advance with the result that lives become increasingly dark until the light of heaven is entirely withdrawn.¹⁰⁹ For both, sin's only resolution is justification

¹⁰¹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 249.

¹⁰²Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 330.

¹⁰³Berkouwer, *Sin*, 42, 241.

¹⁰⁴Berkouwer, *Sin*, 249; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 493.

¹⁰⁵Berkouwer, *Sin*, 25; 179.

¹⁰⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 7:199-200.

¹⁰⁷Berkouwer, *Sin*, 285-286, 303-306; Ellen G. White to J. E. White, 10 Nov. 1879, Letter 29, 1879, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI; idem, "The Exalted Character of the Christian Profession," *RH*, May 5, 1885, 273.

¹⁰⁸Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 142; Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1923), 239.

¹⁰⁹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:447.

(Berkouwer)¹¹⁰ with nothing but the blood of Christ able to wash sin away (White).¹¹¹

It is in regard to sin's relationship to justification that the divisions between Berkouwer and White stand out in stark contrast. Their disagreements directly impact on their divergent understandings regarding the unpardonable sin. White claims that to be forgiven man must acknowledge guilt and fully confess all sin,¹¹² for all sin will ultimately shut off the sinner from Christ unless sin is fully repented of.¹¹³ In contrast, Berkouwer ties justification solely to a divine grace that is confined to the elect through divine determinism.¹¹⁴ Berkouwer sees no connection between sin and divine election (and reprobation),¹¹⁵ yet he acknowledges that sin is an indirect good.¹¹⁶ The process of sin is from God and not man.¹¹⁷ He complicates his argument by positing that man is nevertheless not a helpless victim.¹¹⁸ On the other hand, White argues that sin is irresistible unless such resistance is provided by God.¹¹⁹ Due to God's principles of love and free human will, God allowed sin.¹²⁰

¹¹⁰Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 45, 50-52, 145, 163.

¹¹¹Ellen G. White to J. E. White, 10 Nov. 1879, Letter 29, 1879, *CAR*, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹¹²Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1944-1945), 2:253.

¹¹³Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1952), 17-19.

¹¹⁴Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 50-52, 145.

¹¹⁵Berkouwer, *Sin*, 48.

¹¹⁶Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 207.

¹¹⁷Berkouwer, *Sin*, 48.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 100.

¹¹⁹Ellen G. White, *Christian Experience and Teachings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1940), 103.

¹²⁰Ellen G. White, *SDABC*, 3:1140.

Comparison of the Unpardonable Sin Doctrines of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White

Biographical Examples

Ellen G. White provides significantly more commentary and narrative regarding those who committed the unpardonable sin as did G. C. Berkouwer. This chapter will limit its comparison to the three individuals or groups on which Berkouwer and White agreed were guilty of the sin. These are Pharaoh, the Pharisees, and Judas.

Pharaoh

In a survey of Pharaoh's commission of the unpardonable sin, Berkouwer posits that God raised the Egyptian monarch for the purpose of displaying God's divine power.¹²¹ White disagrees, stating that God did not bring Pharaoh into existence to rebel,¹²² but prior to the king's discourses with Moses, Pharaoh had forfeited God's mercy by his crimes¹²³ against the Hebrews. Berkouwer and White disagree regarding Heaven's handling of the Egyptian on another point. Berkouwer sees Pharaoh as an example of those created for destruction and predestined prior to birth.¹²⁴ On the other hand, White argues that God did not exercise supernatural power to harden Pharaoh's heart.¹²⁵ For prior to each plague Scripture records that Pharaoh understood the nature and effects of each plague that he might have opportunity to save himself from personal

¹²¹Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 212-214.

¹²²Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 267-268; idem, *Desire of Ages*, 324.

¹²³Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:196-197.

¹²⁴Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 212-214.

¹²⁵Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 268.

destruction and his nation from ruin if he so chose, yet he persisted in rejecting every evidence of divine activity.¹²⁶

Pharisees

White agrees with Berkouwer's assertion that the Pharisees believed themselves to be without sin.¹²⁷ There is no evidence to suggest White would disagree with Berkouwer's assertion that the Pharisees believed they were doing God service by allowing him a place.¹²⁸ Both agree that the Pharisees' sin included a flagrant denial and misrepresentation of the Holy Spirit's power, which they assigned to Satan.¹²⁹ White adds, though, that in the sin of the Pharisees, a point is reached where the most pointed appeals by the Holy Spirit become ineffectual. "The desire to submit to God and to do His will is no longer felt. The spiritual senses become dulled," and darkness is the result. Though the Holy Spirit strives with all, those no longer affected by the promptings of the Holy Spirit are given over to their own inclinations.¹³⁰

Judas

Berkouwer places the emphasis for the cause of Judas' betrayal of Christ to be the work of Satan.¹³¹ Though White does not discount satanic influence, she claims Judas'

¹²⁶Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 1:182-183.

¹²⁷Ellen G. White, *Sanctified Life* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1937), 14; Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 118-119.

¹²⁸Berkouwer, *Sin*, 327-328.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*; Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 321-323; *idem*, "Our Words—No. 1," *RH*, Jan. 18, 1898, 38.

¹³⁰Ellen G. White, "The Sin of Rejecting Light," *RH*, July 27, 1897, 46.

¹³¹Berkouwer, *Sin*, 110-111.

betrayal to be activated by his personal choices. He had been given every opportunity to embrace Christ, but had refused to do so, choosing rather to indulge his disposition and deficiencies of character.¹³² By becoming enslaved to one vice he ultimately surrendered himself to Satan.¹³³

In summary, Berkouwer and White are faithful to their compatibilist and non-compatibilist presuppositions regarding the unpardonable sin. Berkouwer clearly places the cause of the sin upon divine determinism while White argues the cause of the sin against the Holy Spirit to be human rejection of divine grace and truth. This is the result of choosing to submit to personal dispositions and deficiencies of the human character.

Facilitators

Berkouwer identifies a combination of factors that facilitate the commission of the unpardonable sin. First is divine election in that God raised Pharaoh up specifically for the purpose of making an example of him through the hardening of his heart and the sin's commission.¹³⁴ Second, man exercises a specific deliberateness and stubbornness in the commission of the sin.¹³⁵ The result is that the sinner is unable to repent due to his heart's subjective disposition. This disposition excludes the possibility of forgiveness.¹³⁶

White agrees with Berkouwer that the unpardonable sin is a willful rejection of the Holy Spirit's ministry and Christ's mercy. However, for White the sin has nothing to

¹³²Ellen G. White, "Judas, the Self-centered, Unconverted Disciple," *MR*, 20:148-149; idem, "The Example of Judas," *RH*, March 17, 1891, 161.

¹³³Ellen G. White, "The Example of Judas," *RH*, March 17, 1891, 161.

¹³⁴Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 212-214.

¹³⁵Berkouwer, *Sin*, 336.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 347-349.

do with divine election or divine reprobation, but is the consequence of unsubdued passions which result in man living out the works of the flesh (Gal.5:19-21). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the result of a gradual imperceptible human resistance to God that ends up misinterpreting the truth,¹³⁷ ridiculing Scripture, the law, and the righteous.¹³⁸ In brief, the unpardonable sin is a consequence of self-infatuation,¹³⁹ self-love, and self-indulgence,¹⁴⁰ despising of counsel and correction,¹⁴¹ vanity and pride,¹⁴² envy, criticism, and doubt¹⁴³—all of which are human generated positions. This state is arrived at once all appeals and rebukes have become ineffectual.¹⁴⁴

Summary

This chapter has compared the theological presuppositions of Berkouwer and White. It has also compared their concepts of the unpardonable sin (as their positions impact on the underlying dilemma of this dissertation). To this point, discussion has focused on areas pertaining to the problem identified in the introduction to this dissertation.

In having compared the theologies and arguments of Berkouwer and White, this

¹³⁷Ellen G. White, “Place a Right Estimate Upon Eternal Things,” *MR*, 4:359.

¹³⁸Ellen G. White, MS 28, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹³⁹“Peril of Sinning against Light,” *RH*, June 29, 1897, 401-402.

¹⁴⁰Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 324.

¹⁴¹“Peril of Sinning against Light,” *RH*, June 29, 1897, 401-402.

¹⁴²Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 3:82.

¹⁴³Ellen G. White, “Place a Right Estimate Upon Eternal Things,” *MR*, 4:359.

¹⁴⁴Ellen G. White, MS 28, 1897, CAR, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI; idem, “Peril of Sinning against Light,” *RH*, June 29, 1897, 401-402.

chapter has demonstrated that though there are important areas of agreement that exist between their understandings of the unpardonable sin, their underlying theologies provide drastically opposing concepts of the sin in relation to the problem that this dissertation set out to address. The stage has been set for a final summary and evaluation of the implications of their respective positions. This final analysis follows next.

CHAPTER 6

FINAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study we have examined the Calvinist, compatibilist and the Arminian, non-compatibilist understandings of sin, especially the unpardonable sin. My method has been to look at the two theologies through a representative of each of these positions—G. C. Berkouwer representing the Calvinist, compatibilist position and Ellen G. White the Arminian, non-compatibilist position. The differences of these two theologies regarding sin open to us their views of God and His fairness and justice.

I have noted that Scripture has numerous terms for sin, and these terms have differing nuances. But ultimately, every sin alienates sinners from God and disrupts the human community. They disorder the life of the sinner and disrupt creation itself. Fortunately, although there are many kinds of sin, due to the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ, almost all of them have something else in common: God can pardon them (1 John 1:9).

There is one exception: the sin against the Holy Spirit. God will not forgive it—because He cannot forgive it—not because He hasn't the power to do so, but because those who commit it have chosen to turn their backs on Him, and He will not force salvation upon them.

By its very nature, then, the unpardonable sin presents a direct affront to the biblical doctrine of salvation in that while Christ has died for all sinners, His death for

those who commit this sin has been in vain—at least for them. Moreover, the fact that people can commit this sin in a universe that God created, and over which He still holds control, challenges our view of His character.

These issues lie at the heart of our perceptions of salvation, divine morality, and human accountability. In this chapter, I summarize the arguments and beliefs first of G. C. Berkouwer and then of Ellen G. White.

Summary and Comment Regarding Compatibilism and Berkouwer

Presuppositions

As demonstrated in this dissertation, the compatibilist teaching regarding the unpardonable sin rests on a belief in the total sovereignty of God. This view of God's sovereignty holds that He has chosen to rescue certain specific fallen sinners from their helpless condition while leaving the rest of humanity to perish eternally. It says that God determines the destiny of human beings without conditions, irrespective of their personal faith or obedience. It holds that human beings cannot resist the divine decision. They cannot change their destiny—not because God forces them to do what He wills, but because He has programmed them to do what He wills.

If this compatibilist view portrays God's role in the salvation and/or condemnation of human beings correctly, then there are those who would feel justified in challenging His goodness; His justice can be questioned. For if the sovereignty of God means He alone determines the direction and destiny of human lives, then they cannot justly be held accountable. That God might have programmed humankind to be content

with their lot doesn't absolve His damning them when He made them in such a way that they couldn't do anything other than obey His will that they sin.

Furthermore, the evidence presented in the chapter on Berkouwer in this dissertation shows that the compatibilist position is that salvation comes down to the question of what God ordained. Human beings are lost and God is the only one who can seek and find them. Thus they cannot contribute anything to their salvation. The compatibilist view is that unconditional election is the only means of salvation. And what is true regarding the salvation of those who are saved must also be true of the damnation of those who are lost. What they have done plays no role in their damnation other than to serve as a justification for it. Their condemnation is the consequence of divine rejection—or more accurately of God's decision that they are to play the role of sinners. There is no place for synergism, for God does not grant salvation nor does He condemn on the basis of human decision. Neither humans' choices nor their perseverance have any influence upon God's decisions regarding where they will spend eternity. God pays no attention to human decisions or actions when He determines their eternal fate. And while faith does confirm God's election of those who are saved, even it is not synergistic; its only role is to rest in God's sovereign work. Ultimately, the compatibilist position necessarily suggests not only that human beings are nothing more than pawns of God, but also that the cross and the atonement Christ has provided are not central to salvation.

Compatibilists credit God with election, yet absolve Him from reprobation. If the individual has no role to play, if there is no place for synergism, it opens divine justice to question, for human destiny is then God's decision—and the responsibility is not man's—that determines his eternal fate.

According to compatibilists, Christ died for the elect in a different sense than He died for the non-elect. Even though God loves all and wishes to save all, He doesn't make His salvation available to all. His love compels Him to invite all to believe and repent, but He doesn't give the reprobate the ability to respond appropriately. So, the reprobates' rejection of God is not a matter of their resisting God, for He has not chosen nor called them. The problems with this position are compounded in that compatibilism argues that we can understand God by understanding the nature of humanity in their fallen state; for God is viewed as being not less than man.

The suggestions that God meant His death to have a different salvific effect on some than it did on others and that He would like to have saved all but could not lead inevitably to two conclusions: First, God is not being fair—for if He were fair, how could He condemn humans for their faulty characters and conduct when He chose them to have those faults? Second, if God would like to save all but cannot, then the claim that He holds complete sovereignty must be questioned. If He has complete sovereignty, and if all act according to His will, then how can He blame them for what they do? If, on the other hand, He does not have full sovereignty, then what or who determines the limits of His sovereignty? And if God's sovereignty is limited, then the question must be asked as to whether He must be finite rather than infinite.

Berkouwer believes that just as election is dependent upon the divine will, so are justification and sanctification. Election is thus not universally inclusive. The elect thus receive justification, sanctification, and perseverance independent of human synergism. In fact, compatibilists attribute all spiritual change as being the work of the Holy Spirit through His divine power and apart from human effort.

The Unpardonable Sin

In expounding on the unpardonable sin, Berkouwer cites Pharaoh as an example of those God brings into existence in order to display His divine power. Pharaoh could not choose whether or not to commit the sin against the Holy Spirit, for he was predestined to commit it. Berkouwer maintains that in the case of Pharaoh, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the consequence of the divine will rather than the human will. Furthermore, he argues that sin is an indirect good, for if God is sovereign over everyone and everything, therefore everything that exists does so because its existence is according to His will. Moreover, God does not orchestrate the reprobation of human beings—not that He has not done it, but because His sovereignty allows it. Berkouwer sees no link between sin and divine reprobation. In other words, he believes that despite the fact that those who are sinners are so because God has willed that, God should not be considered as having been unjust.

Berkouwer's theological presuppositions demonstrate an inner consistency and coherence, in that He holds that God's absolute sovereignty can be maintained only if He is responsible for the existence of everything in all Creation—including sin. His application, then, of his theological presuppositions in the case of Pharaoh results in his conclusion that though God created Pharaoh to commit the unpardonable sin, He was justified in damning him. But his conclusion is faulty. If it truly was God's will that Pharaoh refuse what the Holy Spirit, speaking through Moses and Aaron, was calling him to do, then placing any blame on Pharaoh, saying that he was guilty of reprobation and worthy of eternal death, is problematic. If the compatibilist position is correct, then God

should bear some responsibility, for it was He who planned the course of this unfortunate man's life, and not the man himself.

Conscience and the Unpardonable Sin

Finally, compatibilists, including Berkouwer, believe that an indication that the unpardonable sin has not been committed is a concerned conscience. Berkouwer claims it is reasonable to believe that if one fears he or she has committed the unpardonable sin, that fear is a sure index that one has not committed it. His litmus test, therefore, rests upon human subjectivity, for it is based upon the feelings of the individual rather than on an independent, objective standard.

Summary and Comment Regarding Non-compatibilism and Ellen G. White

Presuppositions

Compatibilists argue that there are two categories of human beings: the elect and the reprobate. Non-compatibilists see all human beings as being essentially on the same ground spiritually at birth; it is the choices they make that eventually divide them into one or the other of those two categories. For non-compatibilists, both salvation and damnation are conditional upon the individual's response to divine grace. They see God as, through the Holy Spirit, appealing to the individual's understanding, will, judgment, and conscience.

Those who find this work of the Holy Spirit persuasive and convicting and who respond positively to His call receive divine (Scripture-based) enlightenment. But the consciences of those who persist in rejecting the Holy Spirit's appeal harden, and, eventually, they will reap the fruit of the choices they have made. Non-compatibilists

believe that God is not coercive—people can reject God even though they’ve seen the highest displays of His mercy and power.

All are responsible for the choices they make either to embrace the salvation God offers or to turn from Him and eventually commit the unpardonable sin. This raises some questions that are difficult for the non-compatibilist to resolve. These include the dilemma over God’s sovereignty (which one cannot deny to be an important attribute of God), as it relates to His divine foreknowledge and the origin and existence of sin. These issues are a challenge to the non-compatibilist’s perception of God’s character. White’s position regarding human freedom is susceptible to criticism in that it may place possible limitations on divine sovereignty. This in turn impacts human understanding of the divine nature and the possibility of limits on God’s ability to deal with sin. Compatibilists may argue whether or not non-compatibilist positions are fully coherent with Scripture.

Unlike the compatibilist position regarding justification, Ellen White claims that God offers it to all human beings on condition of their repentance and their embracing of Christ’s atonement. Those who accept His offer can experience a radical change of heart and mind.

Likewise, sanctification is a process of radical transformation of human character so that it resembles God’s. This transformation occurs as the saved faithfully apply Scripture to their life. White places the concept of perfection within the context of the reflection of God’s character. In this sense, she holds that perfection of character is achievable, because those who apply Scripture to their life become convicted of sin and then turn to Christ, who through the Holy Spirit brings them into harmony with the will

of God. In this sense, faith acts as an active conduit of grace through which the individual appropriates the merits of Christ and His character.¹

The Unpardonable Sin

Ellen White's theology of the unpardonable sin forestalls those who wish to indict the character of God because she sees God as, throughout the whole process, continuing His attempts to win the individual and thus provide him or her with salvation.

This non-compatibilist position sees the Holy Spirit as working for the salvation of all of humanity irrespective of station, ethnicity, gender, or circumstance. And it contends that God has given every human being the privilege of choosing to embrace divine grace and thus assimilate it or spurn that grace and even to battle against it.

Ellen G. White's view of the unpardonable sin stems from her theology of sin and salvation, and her understanding of God's nature and character. Compatibilists see these positions as inconsistent with Scripture. These challenges pertain to the vulnerability of non-compatibilism to a salvation-by-works theology. Non-compatibilist theology struggles with *sola gratia* (by grace alone), for there is an undeniable tension between behavior and grace which has not, as yet, been laid to rest. This dilemma is evident in White positing that one's submission to God's will as communicated through Scripture to be an essential element in salvation. Submission includes returning to the state of the first couple when they were created—that of being made in God's likeness (to physically resemble Him) and in His image (to reflect His moral character) (Gen 1:26, 27). Biblical

¹While it has been correctly argued that Ellen G. White's understanding of justification, sanctification, and perfection underwent significant maturation through the period of her ministry, her understanding of the centrality of the development of the character of Christ in the life of the Christian was a constant theme. For a more comprehensive survey of the development of White's maturation regarding

election is not the result of divine determinism. Instead, one is elected when one enters a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency.” Ellen White rejects the concept of unconditional election. Christ works for the salvation of all. Moreover, the exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God's government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened.”²

The wicked are reprobate through personal choice. Thus the unpardonable sin is the result of a willful rejection of the Holy Spirit's work and of Christ's mercy. The sin against the Holy Spirit is the consequence of unsubdued passions that result in a person's doing the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). “Like Israel of old the wicked destroy themselves. The lost fall by their iniquity. By a life of sin, they have placed themselves so out of harmony with God, their natures have become so debased with evil, that the manifestation of His glory is to them a consuming fire.”³ God's foreknowledge does not shape character; for all behave in accordance with their individual free wills. They choose either to cooperate with or to reject the divine will, and the choice they make has eternal consequences. The Holy Spirit enables all to exercise the will freely, and all may overcome sin in Christ's strength.

According to Ellen White, sin did not originate with God, but He allowed it to continue to exist. Had God forced His will upon His creation, He would have violated

her doctrines of justification, sanctification, and perfection, see: Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1995).

²Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 22.

³Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 37.

and destroyed the foundational principles of His kingdom, which are also the central elements of His character: love and free will. Non-compatibilists believe that love, not divine determinism, is the foundation of God's government. This raises questions regarding divine foreknowledge, integrity, and the fairness of God's character. Reformed theologians question that if God foreknew the entrance of sin, why was it allowed? If allowed rather than being the consequence of divine determinism, is divine sovereignty limited, for could He not have prevented it?

Ellen White posits that the unpardonable sin develops as a result of a person's rejection of divine grace and truth. This rejection grows out of that person's retaining an unregenerate disposition and deficiencies of character rather than being willing to surrender to and cooperate with God. The sin against the Holy Spirit is not the result of predestination or rejection. Rather, it is the result of an ongoing resistance to God. It is the result of self-enthronement. This occurs when one has continually and finally resisted all rebukes and appeals to surrender fully to God.

Much of Ellen White's discussion of the unpardonable sin is found in her biblical narratives. Unlike Berkouwer, she posits that God did not bring Pharaoh into existence so he would rebel and thus become the foil on which God could display His power. She holds that Pharaoh had forfeited God's mercy even before Moses confronted him by the crimes he had committed against the Hebrews. This leads to the conclusion that to fully understand this sin against the Holy Spirit, we must also consider its effects on a person's relationships with other people.

Furthermore, White holds that before each plague, Pharaoh was informed about its nature and effects, and he had the opportunity to save himself if he so chose. Yet he persisted in rejecting every evidence of divine action.

The catalyst of Korah's sin against the Holy Spirit was covetousness. His pride and selfishness led him to covet the respect that belonged to the leaders God had chosen for His people. It led Korah to challenge not only the authority of God's human servants, but also of God Himself.

Covetousness—though of a different kind—was also the cause of Achan's fall. The damnation of both Korah and Achan came only after God had extended through His servants every possible appeal, and the rebellious men had spurned them all.

Ellen White pictures the fall of the Pharisees into the unpardonable sin as a progression of choices that eventually had so hardened them that they no longer had the spiritual sensitivity to be aware of His influence. Many “prepare for a course of resistance which, if followed, will continue till we have no power to do otherwise. A point is reached where the most pointed appeals” become ineffectual. “The desire to submit to God and to do His will is no longer felt. The spiritual senses become dulled. Darkness is the result.”

The Holy Spirit strives with all, but if He is continually resisted, conviction is stifled and God gives such up to reap the consequences they've incurred by following their own inclinations (see: Rom 1:21-26). This occurs in spite of the Holy Spirit having strived with all, and after His strongest promptings have been rejected.

Judas persistently indulged his deficiencies in character until he had surrendered himself to Satan. Ananias's and Sapphira's lives followed the same pattern. They were

both damned by their own persistent rejection of all divine appeals and after they had repulsed all the grace extended to them.

Conscience and the Unpardonable Sin

Ellen White does not consider the conscience to be a reliable guide to right and wrong, for it can be twisted and may thus mislead us. We should never rely on it to indicate our standing with God; it is trustworthy only when guided by divine grace. When people violate their conscience, it becomes hardened and ceases to recognize and warn of the encroachment of sin. Pharaoh's conscience remained active even after he had completely forfeited God's mercy and failed to respond to God, His truth, and His servants. Achan's conscience also moved him to a false repentance when he realized there was no other hope of escaping the consequences of his sin. And after Judas betrayed Christ, his conscience drove him to suicide (Matt 27:3-5). All three cases make clear that because of the subjectivity of conscience, it cannot keep us from committing the unpardonable sin. Ellen White taught that the subjectivity of the conscience can be held in check only as it is informed by the objective standard that is Holy Scripture.

Coherence with Scripture

In this dissertation I have examined the unpardonable sin from the perspective of both compatibilism and non-compatibilism. In order to satisfy our understanding of the topic, I have of necessity surveyed the theological presuppositions of both Berkouwer and Ellen White (as representatives of each system) with the purpose of ascertaining whether or not their understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit is compatible with their other doctrinal positions as they impact upon the topic in question.

Compatibilism's Coherence with Scripture

In order for compatibilists to arrive at coherence with Scripture, their interpretation of the text of Scripture must be limited in its scope and universality. This premise can be established by making a review of three cardinal claims made by compatibilists which have been addressed in this dissertation.

First, John's rendition of the teaching of Christ, for "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16), is placed in a context that the term "world" should be understood as indicating that the whole world is represented by the elect, but not all individuals are meant to be included in the idea of "whole world."⁴ This assumption is not consistent with either the context of John 3:16 or the greater context of Scripture. Moreover, the Greek word used in John 3:16 for "world" is *cosmos*. The word *cosmos* indicates an inclusiveness of every person on the planet.⁵

Second, compatibilism is not consistent with Scripture from the perspective of mankind's freedom of choice. Examples of this are evident in Moses' pronouncement of conditional blessing and conditional cursing in Deuteronomy, as well as in Joshua's final address to the children of Israel. Both addresses provide a framework for numerous other biblical authors to expand on the theme of a free human will.

Moses commences his address of blessing in the following way: "Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God

⁴Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 17.

⁵Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 56.

will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God” (Deut 28:1-2). It is self-evident in the text that God’s offered blessings to Israel are contingent upon obedience to “the voice of the LORD.” If human obedience is pre-ordained, why would Moses indicate that the blessings were contingent upon a human response?

The same problem is compounded in regard to Moses’ conditional curses. “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (Deut 28:15). Why would God send warning of an occurrence in which disobedience has pre-ordained?

This compatibilist dilemma is further compounded by Joshua’s final farewell to Israel:

Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Josh 24:14-15)

The compatibilist problem is exacerbated by Israel’s response: “So the people answered and said: ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods’” (Josh 24:16). It would be difficult from an examination of these textual examples to believe that human decision is not a significant ingredient in the determination of both righteousness and apostasy, of holiness and rebellion, of salvation and the unpardonable sin. Strengthening compatibilism’s incoherence with Scripture is that the provided

biblical examples are consistent with the overall context of Scripture regarding human choice.

While compatibilism does not argue against human involvement and relationship to reprobation, it rejects human involvement with regard to salvation. This brings us to compatibilism's third major inconsistency with Holy Scripture: incoherence in relation to human involvement in the plan of salvation. The apostle Paul provides ample argument to detract from predestination's claim that the elect are mere recipients of justification and sanctification, and thus salvation. There is no better argument than in the apostle's epistle to the Philippians: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). The apostle's conclusion here of human involvement is consistent with his other epistles and is in agreement with James that true faith without response or action is impossible (Jas 2:18-26). Scripture portrays a faith that must reach out its hand in response to God's outstretched hand and must grasp the hand of divinity. Failure to respond to grace is viewed in Scripture as rejection of proffered grace.

Non-compatibilism's Coherence with Scripture

Conversely, in regard to each of the premises of compatibilism (Christ did not die for the sins of all; God elects independent of human choice; and, man is not involved in the plan of salvation), non-compatibilism is more coherent with Scripture. Like compatibilism, non-compatibilism's understanding of the unpardonable sin is impacted in its understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit by its theological presuppositions.

First, non-compatibilists argue that John 3:16 should be given a literal interpretation; "God so loved the (whole) world that He gave His only begotten Son that

WHOSOEVER believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” This position is consistent with all of Scripture and requires no special or external explanation.

Second, as previously demonstrated, when Scripture calls on mankind to choose, such a call should be understood in a literal, at face value, sense. This view is consistent with the great commission of Matt 28:19-20. If divine election is the determinant factor in salvation or reprobation, there would be little need for God’s will to be made manifest to humanity, for the elect have been predetermined independent of the human agent. Furthermore, in Moses’ summation of the blessings and cursings given in Deuteronomy, his conclusion is, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deut 30:19). The sanctity of free human will is foundational to Scripture’s portrayal of the nature of man.

Third, non-compatibilists maintain there is human involvement in both election and damnation. If this were not the case, the countless appeals of God’s holy prophets down through the ages would hold little significance. It should be recognized that even the victims of crime are involved, even if against their will. The biblical record demonstrates that Adam, Lot, Lot’s wives, and daughters were all involved in the salvation of Lot and his daughters at the destruction of Sodom (Gen 18). Israel was involved in the crossing of the Red Sea (they could have declined to follow the opened pathway through the tempest) (Exod 14). Each of the disciples responded to Christ’s invitation, while Judas experienced a change of choice which resulted in a course of action that impacted his eternal destiny. There were others whom Christ called; some chose not to accept the invitation (Matt 19:27), while others withdrew from Him when

the going became hard. The biblical record is far too exhaustive to allow anything but a literal understanding of human choice and involvement in salvation or damnation.

Conclusion

Having reviewed both the compatibilist and non-compatibilist challenges regarding their coherence with Scripture, we can assume that both systems are internally consistent and coherent. The challenges to both systems lie in their coherence with Scripture, for both theologies fail to satisfy every challenge raised.

Compatibilists have concerns pertaining to the character of God within the framework of non-compatibilist thought. As already mentioned, these concerns are in connection with sovereignty, foreknowledge, and the appearance of sin. Neither compatibilism with its accentuation of divine sovereignty, nor non-compatibilism with its focus on divine love gets to have everything its own way. One must recognize that there must be restraints placed by God either on the exercise of His divine sovereignty or on the exercise of His love, or on both sovereignty and love. Furthermore, compatibilism is unavoidably confronted by the lack of synergism within its theology while non-compatibilism is challenged by the danger of a salvation-by-works theology. Neither system receives a clean bill of health. Should a recognized tension therefore not be allowed regarding these unavoidable challenges to both systems? Is it plausible that divinity may assume its own limitations for its own purposes? And to a certain degree, is it feasible that neither system holds all the answers?

That having been said, this dissertation assumes the following conclusions: In order to maintain a compatibilist coherence, the reader of Scripture must depart from an at-face-value rendition of the text through providing extra-biblical meanings or altering

contexts. In contrast, non-compatibilism allows for a more literal interpretation of the biblical text. It needs no external context or meaning. Key words and phrases such as “choose you this day” and “God so loved . . . that whosoever” mean precisely what is indicated in the text. Moreover, in order to sustain the compatibilist argument, one has to allow for a portrayal of divine character that has placed limits on God’s claims of love, grace, forgiveness, compassion, and self-control. On the other hand, though challenged in regard to limits non-compatibilism places on divine sovereignty and foreknowledge, it is able to maintain what I regard as a better coherence between its positions and the biblically ascribed divine attributes without external assistance.

These conclusions lead ultimately to the unavoidable recognition that the only system of theological thought that can truly address the teaching of Jesus regarding the unpardonable sin is the Arminian system since it supports human free will and divine love as key concepts to undergird any doctrine of sin. On the other hand, the Reformed theological system cannot account for the doctrine of the sin against the Holy Spirit because the reprobate cannot commit this sin since they are already eternally damned by an eternal decree of God. Furthermore, the redeemed cannot sin against the Holy Spirit either since otherwise they would be lost. As stated, the only system of thought that can truly deal with the clear and obvious teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is Arminianism as portrayed in the writings of Ellen G. White.

Comparing the differing understandings between the compatibilist and non-compatibilist perceptions of God in His dealings with sinners, David Jarnes observes that in attempting to reflect the biblical revelation of God, compatibilists are especially

impressed with the concept of “His supreme power, His sovereignty” as His defining characteristic; as that which directs all that He does.

Whatever the profession of the God of the compatibilists regarding love and justice, the actions of that God reveal Him to be supremely self-centered—focused on maintaining and proclaiming His sovereignty, His control, even though it means the creatures He creates (supposedly in His image) must live as automatons, mere puppets with no choice but to act out the roles He has scripted for them—roles that this supreme Playwright fills with evil as well as good. And then this God, acting now as the Chief Justice of the universe’s Supreme Court, sentences the living, conscious puppets He programmed to play the role of sinners to suffer the torments of hell throughout eternity. If these were the actions of a human being, we would consider that person to be flawed, twisted, [even] demonic. Only a supremely self-centered Deity would act this way.⁶

Ethical Implications

The ethical implications arising from the conflicting compatibilist and non-compatibilist understandings of the unpardonable sin and their relative theological presuppositions stand in stark contrast. For the compatibilist, if election and/or reprobation are not related to *fide praxis* but contingent on an independent divine determinism, then obedience to God’s Word and one’s relationship to one’s fellow man have no connection to salvation or damnation. Neither salvation nor damnation is impacted by a person’s ethical conduct, other than the fact that it would appear to be a good idea, but not a necessity. Social evils such as communism, fascism, racism, or gender discrimination are then feasible in the experience of the child of God. It was on the basis of Reformed theology that the foundation of apartheid in South Africa was laid. Caucasians viewed themselves as God’s elect, while the Zulu and the Hottentot were viewed as the reprobate. If there are no ethical expectancies for the elect, individuals may be justified in manipulating each other for personal advantage as the compatibilists argue

⁶David Jarnes, personal communication to the author, October 22, 2013.

that God does. Social conscience is relegated to become an unnecessary construct. Divine grace that would lead a willing individual to do good becomes unrequired. Micah's admonishment, "He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) is no longer needed by the elect. It is no longer necessary to embrace God through personal relationship. Both salvation and damnation (however they may be manifest in the individual) are the mere consequence of a divine determinism that does not take the individual into account.

On the other hand, *fide praxis* is viewed as extremely consequential in non-compatibilism, for human destiny becomes interlinked with the exercise of faith. While God provides the grace and the power for godliness, it is a product first of choice and then endurance: "Here is the patience [endurance] of the saints; here *are* those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12). Cain's question regarding the necessity to be his brother's keeper is understood in the affirmative. A correspondence between faith and life direction is enjoined. Accountability on behalf of the individual toward God and his fellow man must of necessity ensue, for even demons believe, but without hope (Jas 2:19). *Praxis* becomes the vibrant response to *fide*.

However, non-compatibilism remains confronted and potentially weakened by the specter of an undercurrent of salvation by works. Both Berkouwer and White recognize a biblical call to holiness and perfection. Berkouwer sees this as a gift of the Holy Spirit in the act of sanctification. White sees it as an ongoing process of sanctification that involves the direction of the life. However, she does make a largely unrecognized contribution to this debate. It is helpful that we recognize that Ellen White, like many

others, matured in both her Christian experience and her theology over many decades of public ministry. There was a discernable shift of emphasis from a Sinai- to a Calvary-influenced view of salvation. However, on the matter of sanctification and holiness, there remained a focus on salvation being the restoration of God's moral character in the life of the Christian. Recognizing this is central to understanding her in regard to the human response to God. Change occurs only in the beholding of Christ. Therefore, any behavior is not works oriented, but Christ engendered. Thus she avoids the ethical danger that haunts Arminianism. In this respect one might argue that she provides a bridge between compatibilism and non-compatibilism, for both grace and human response are embraced.

Final Conclusions and Comments

There were several goals laid out in the purpose of this study. The first was to examine the doctrine of the sin against the Holy Spirit in the context of contemporary theological divisions between compatibilism and non-compatibilism. This was accomplished in chapter 2 through a survey of compatibilist and non-compatibilist positions on the topic and also in chapters 3 and 4 by means of a more in-depth examination of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White.

The second goal was to determine whether or not the contrasting assumptions regarding the notions of human free will render the two approaches to the sin against the Holy Spirit coherent internally and with Scripture. The third quest of this dissertation was to discover some of the theological and ethical implications arising from the diverse perspectives of compatibilism and non-compatibilism. Finally, this dissertation set out to determine whether or not their respective theologies are consistent with *fide praxis*. All three of these objectives have been addressed in this chapter.

In this work I have examined the Calvinistic compatibilist and the Arminian non-compatibilist views of the sin against the Holy Spirit as seen in the writings of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White. This study has shown that Ellen White does not consider the doctrine of the unpardonable sin to be incompatible with the doctrine of salvation. As observed in Ellen White's writings, non-compatibilist theology pictures a compassionate Divinity who does everything possible within the principles of love and the freedom of the human will to win all of humanity to Himself. White presents this God as faithfully providing all the grace necessary to enable human beings to make the right choices and to carry them out in such a way as to ensure salvation.

While non-compatibilism admits that the divine sovereign it pictures cannot save everyone (because God has given human beings the freedom to choose for themselves whether or not to turn to Him for salvation), it must be recognized that this is true also of the divine sovereign that compatibilism pictures—though compatibilism offers no explanation as to why God cannot elect all to salvation. Thus neither the compatibilist divinity nor the non-compatibilist divinity gets all that they desire. In the non-compatibilist view, God is limited only because He has chosen to be. The divine monarch has placed limits upon Himself to ensure that His subjects love and obey Him by their own choice and not because He has in some way compelled them to do so—which wouldn't work anyway since coercion cannot produce either love or true obedience. The as-yet unexplained limits of God posited by the compatibilists appear to be based upon a need to fulfill some arbitrary compulsion to demonstrate His power and divine sovereignty.

These views of the God of Holy Scripture diverge as they do because in spite of the two theological camps having very similar hermeneutics, they support theologies that differ significantly. In compatibilism as represented by G. C. Berkouwer, God, for some untold reason, cannot save everyone. So those who hold this view argue in great detail that the choice of whom to save and whom to damn is not based on any human decision. Rather, it stands on a divine determinism that pays no attention to any rational factor.

Non-compatibilism as represented by Ellen White also recognizes that the God of Holy Scripture does not get everything He wants. He desires that all human beings be saved, but that desire is only partially fulfilled. However, non-compatibilism contends that no one is damned because God has withheld divine grace and election from him or her. Rather, it pictures all humanity as receiving an abundance of divine love. However, to be truly loving, and to receive true devotion and obedience from human beings, God must guarantee the freedom of the human will. So, the picture of divinity painted by Ellen White is not one of divine impotence, but rather one of divine restraint. Here it stands in contrast with Berkouwer's portrayal of God, for the divinity he portrays arbitrarily determines whom He will save and who will be condemned.

I conclude, then, that whether or not the charge that a doctrine of an unpardonable sin challenges some individuals' perceptions regarding the biblical doctrine of salvation is sustainable depends upon whether one understands the issue as a compatibilist or as a non-compatibilist. The same can be assumed with regard to the questions that the existence of an unpardonable sin raises concerning the character of God. Berkouwer's doctrinal presuppositions and his theology of the unpardonable sin place all accountability for this sin upon the supreme Sovereign. Though Berkouwer might wish to

expunge from God any culpability for the state of the reprobate, his arguments are faced with a challenge, for in the very act of providing grace and salvation to those whom God has arbitrarily chosen to elect, He has either directly or indirectly doomed the rest to damnation. This is true because compatibilism says nothing humans do has any bearing on whether or not God will place them among His elect and grant them salvation. The arbitrariness of this approach to salvation brings God's character into question. Moreover, there are further theological implications to God assuming full accountability for Him being the sole determining factor in election (and thus reprobation). If the divine sovereign must judge the reprobate (including those guilty of committing the sin against the Holy Spirit), then ultimately, God must place His own actions and character under that judgment, for He is the ultimate orchestrator of each life choice. Simply put, God must bring His own works into judgment. This dilemma is noted by Adam Clark who writes that "if man be forced to believe, he believes not at all: it is the forcing power that believes, not the machine forced."⁷

On the other hand, Ellen G. White consistently presents a God who is compassionate and loving. Her perception of Him matches the claims of Holy Scripture regarding both His character and actions. This is a God who wants to save all human beings. Scripture pictures Christ as weeping over Jerusalem because its people refused to be saved even though He wanted to gather them under His wings as a hen gathers her chicks, "but," as Jesus put it, "you were not willing" (Matt 23:37). This is the God of whom John wrote when he proclaimed: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

⁷Clark, *Holiness Miscellany*, 360-361.

In doing this study, comparing these differing understandings of God as seen in His dealings with sin and sinners, one cannot help but see the contrast between what they portray concerning God. Compatibilists attempt to reflect the teachings of Scripture regarding God. They are especially impressed with its portrayal of His supreme power, His sovereignty—as if that is His defining characteristic, the one that directs all He does.

The non-compatibilist position, particularly as seen in Ellen G. White’s reading of Scripture, also recognizes God as being the supreme sovereign of this universe, which He created. But this theology does not consider God’s chief characteristic to be His overwhelming power or control. It says instead that characteristic is His love—His humble, self-sacrificing love. That love moved Him to give the creatures He created the freedom to think and to choose despite the threat to His sovereignty the gift of freedom posed, and despite the suffering He knew would result—suffering that He would bear as well as His creatures. True love exists only where there is freedom. It doesn’t coerce; it seeks only to persuade. Self-sacrifice is the strongest, most persuasive argument that anyone can make, and God hasn’t hesitated to make that argument.⁸ Jesus’ incarnation and death make that clear.

⁸David Jarnes, personal communication to the author, October 22, 2013.

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